

APPENDIX IN SUPPORT OF MOTION FOR ORDER OF EXECUTION

Judgment Creditors file the following materials in support of their Motion for Order of Execution:

1. *Russia Supports the Taliban*, WARSAW INSTITUTE, March 24, 2017.
2. *How Russia Built a Channel to the Taliban, Once an Enemy*, NEW YORK TIMES, July 13, 2020.
3. *US intelligence suspects Russia of supporting the Taliban*, UAWIRE, February 14, 2016.
4. *Russia, Taliban share intelligence in fight against ISIS*, CNN, December 24, 2015.
5. Statement For the Record by General John W. Nicholson Commander U.S. Forces – Afghanistan Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation In Afghanistan, February 9, 2017.
6. *Russia ‘arming the Afghan Taliban’, says US*, BBC NEWS, March 23, 2018.
7. *Russian Bounties on U.S. Troops: Why Hasn’t the Administration Responded?*, HOUSE OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, July 9, 2020.
8. Press Conference by Secretary Mattis in Afghanistan, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, April 24, 2017.
9. Military Assessment of The Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East, COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES: HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, March 29, 2017.
10. Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States European Command, COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES: UNITED STATES SENATE, March 23, 2017.
11. *Afghan Lawmakers: Russian Support to Taliban No Secret*, VOA, June 29, 2020.
12. *Russia accused of supplying Taliban as power shifts create strange bedfellows*, THE GUARDIAN, October 22, 2017.
13. *Iran allegedly facilitating Taliban-Russian contracts*, MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE, May 2, 2017.
14. *Videos suggest Russian government may be arming Taliban*, CNN, July 25, 2017.
15. *Russia funds Taliban in war against NATO forces*, THE TIMES, October 16, 2017.

16. *Russia Defines Its Post-Takeover Role in the Afghan Conflict*, RUSI, September 2, 2021.
17. *Russia hands over Afghan embassy in Moscow to the Taliban, Islamic flag is raised*, JIHADWATCH, April 12, 2022.
18. *Russia latest country to establish diplomatic ties with Taliban*, GLOBAL SECURITY, April 9, 2022.
19. *Taliban officials nearing contract for purchase of gasoline from Russia*, REUTERS, August 29, 2022.
20. *Accused Russian Spy's U.S. legal fees paid by Moscow-owned bank*, REUTERS, May 12, 2015.
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22. *U.S. Treasury Imposes Immediate Economic Costs in Response to Actions in the Donetsk and Lukansk Regions: Blocking Major Russian Financial Institutions*, U.S. DEPT. OF THE TREASURY, February 22, 2022.
23. Federal Register/Vol. 87, No. 39 Notice of OFAC Sanctions Actions, U.S. DEPT. OF THE TREASURY.
24. *A Taliban-Russia Team-Up Against ISIS?*, THE DAILY BEAST, April 13, 2017.
25. Defense Secretary Expresses Concern Over Russian Support for the Taliban, NPR, March 31, 2017.
26. Statement for the Record by General John W. Nicholson Commander U.S. Forces Afghanistan Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, July 9, 2020.
27. *Putin to Team Up with the Taliban to Wipe Out Islamic State – And Give Them Weapons*, EXPRESS, October 26, 2015.
28. *Majlis Podcast: What is Happening in Kunduz, And Why Again?*, RADIOFREEEUROPE, October 8, 2019.
29. *Russia and the Taliban: Prospective Partners*, RUSI, September 14, 2021.
30. *Russia Backs Taliban Call to Withdraw Foreign Troops*, TOLO NEWS, April 1, 2017.
31. *Russia has been engaging with the Taliban for years. The U.S. withdrawal might give it an opportunity to expand its role*, CBS NEWS, August 21, 2021.
32. *Russia is sending weapons to Taliban, top U.S. General confirms*, THE WASHINGTON POST, April 24, 2017.

33. *Russia is sharing information with the Taliban to fight the Islamic State*, THE WASHINGTON POST, December 23, 2015.
34. *Russia Says Trying to Push Afghan Taliban to Join National Reconciliation*, RADIOFREEEUROPE, April 1, 2017.
35. *Top U.S. Commander In Afghanistan Accuses Russia of Aiding Taliban*, NPR, March 26, 2018.
36. *U.S. Suspects Russia Supplying Small Arms to Taliban in Afghanistan*, WSJ, April 24, 2017.
37. *Understanding the Russia-Taliban Connection*, THE DIPLOMAT, August 4, 2017.
38. *Why is Russia Helping Anti-U.S. Insurgents In Afghanistan?*, NPR, February 13, 2017.
39. *Russia cash goes straight into the hands of Taliban chiefs*, THE TIMES, October 16, 2017.
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Russia Supports the Taliban



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Last month, another US General, John Nicholson, current commander of international military force in Afghanistan, testified in the Senate that Russia provided supplies as well as diplomatic support to the Taliban. Moscow consequently denies any such accusations. Taliban representatives had already told Reuters that the group has had contacts with Moscow since at least 2007, but Russian involvement did not extend beyond "moral and political support". However, evidence of military cooperation can be seen in the very Afghanistan itself. The fighting going on in some southern and northern provinces proves that the Taliban receive support not only from Pakistan but also from Russian and Iran. In the Kunduz province weapons

made in Russia have been found. Besides, there have been accusations from Kabul that Russian engineers repair Taliban heavy weapons in Tajikistan. Afghan Senate has promised to examine military contacts of the Taliban with Iran and Russia.

At the end of December 2016, special presidential envoy of Putin to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, admitted that Moscow is in contact with the Taliban leaders. "In Afghanistan, the Taliban are fighting against people that we fight in Syria, and thus our interests are aligned," Kabulov said. Following the success in Syria, Putin wants to strike the United States at yet another front. Russia and the West have no common goals in Afghanistan. On the contrary, for the Russian siloviki Afghanistan is yet another front of global competition with the US. Going back to Afghanistan, Russia wants to strengthen its influence in Central Asia and take part in international arrangements concerning Afghanistan. Last month, another US General, John Nicholson, current commander of international military force in Afghanistan, testified in the Senate that Russia provided supplies as well as diplomatic support to the Taliban. Moscow consequently denies any such accusations. Taliban representatives had already told Reuters that the group has had contacts with Moscow since at least 2007, but Russian involvement did not extend beyond "moral and political support". However, evidence of military cooperation can be seen in the very Afghanistan itself. The fighting going on in some southern and northern provinces proves that the Taliban receive support not only from Pakistan but also from Russian and Iran. In the Kunduz province weapons made in Russia have been found. Besides, there have been accusations from Kabul that Russian engineers repair Taliban heavy weapons in Tajikistan. Afghan Senate has promised to examine military contacts of the Taliban with Iran and Russia.

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How Russia Built a Channel to the Taliban, Once an Enemy

The recent assessment that Russia paid bounties to the insurgents to attack U.S. troops stunned many, but officials said the Kremlin's outreach began almost a decade ago.

July 13, 2020



Soldiers at the Bala Hissar military base in the city of Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan, which was overrun by the Taliban in 2015. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

KABUL, Afghanistan — During one of the most violent stretches of fighting in northern Afghanistan, as the Taliban scored victories that had eluded them

since the beginning of the conflict, the top American commander went public with a suspicion that had nagged for years: Russia was aiding the insurgents.

In diplomatic circles in Kabul around the time of that accusation, in 2017, there were murmurs that the Russian assistance had included night-vision goggles and armor-piercing ammunition.

But Gen. John W. Nicholson, the commander, offered no definitive evidence, and that spoke to how confusing the battlefield had become as three longtime adversaries — the Taliban, Russia and Iran — agreed on their common interest in seeing the Americans leave Afghanistan. In the maze of corruption, cash and foreign hands in Afghanistan, it was no easy task to pin down who was doing what.

"We've had weapons brought to this headquarters and given to us by Afghan leaders and said, 'This was given by the Russians to the Taliban,'" General Nicholson [said a year later](#). "We know that the Russians are involved."

The recent revelation of an American intelligence assessment that Russia had provided the Taliban with bounties to attack U.S. and coalition troops [stunned political leaders in Washington](#) and added a potent dose of Cold War-style skulduggery to deliberations over Afghanistan's future. Both Russia and the Taliban have rejected the assertion.

Taliban members in March in the Alingar district of Laghman Province, Afghanistan. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

But while that would be a notable escalation of Russian interference in Afghanistan, it was clear to many officials that Russia had been working to hedge its bets with the Taliban for years. The Russians saw the Afghan government as entirely controlled by the United States, and at worst so

fragile that it would struggle to survive the U.S. withdrawal.

In interviews, Afghan and American officials and foreign diplomats with years of experience in Kabul say that what began as a diplomatic channel between Russia and the Taliban just under a decade ago has more recently blossomed into a mutually beneficial alliance that has allowed the Kremlin to reassert its influence in the region.

The shift coincided with increasing hostility between the United States and Russia over Syria's civil war and other conflicts, analysts say, as well as Russia's frustration with rising instability in Afghanistan and the slow pace of the U.S. pullout.

Now, the United States is [conducting the troop withdrawal](#) it agreed to with the Taliban even without a final peace deal between the insurgents and the Afghan government which the Americans have supported for years. But Russia's covert efforts, officials and analysts say, are aimed at harassing and embarrassing the United States as the troops leave rather than profoundly changing the course of the conflict.

"It was in modest quantities; it was not designed to be a game-changer on the battlefield," General Nicholson, who has since retired from the military, told the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Thursday about Russian arms and aid to the Taliban. "For example, the Taliban wanted surface-to-air missiles, the Russians didn't give it to them. So I always concluded that their support to the Taliban was calibrated in some sense."

American troops, shown in Helmand Province last fall, are withdrawing from Afghanistan after a deal was reached with the Taliban. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Some pointed out the considerably more extensive American efforts to [support the mujahedeen insurgency](#) against the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

"We did the same," said Marc Polymeropoulos, a former C.I.A. field officer in Afghanistan who retired last year as the agency's acting chief of operations in Europe and Eurasia. "We turned the heat up as the Russians were leaving Afghanistan."

"Putin," he said, "is a student of history."

As things began turning on the battlefield in recent years, officials described increasing suspicions of a greater Russian role in helping the Taliban. But they often struggled to pin down specifics, other than occasional influxes of new weapons and munitions that could have had several sources. In addition to Pakistan's well-established support to the Taliban, [Iran was taking a greater hand in helping the insurgents](#), and often using similar channels as the Russians, Afghan intelligence officials say.

The dots began connecting more clearly during a stretch of alarming violence in northern Afghanistan, when the Taliban twice overran Kunduz city, a provincial capital, in 2015 and 2016, sending the U.S. military scrambling.

As Afghan intelligence narrowed in on the ambitious regional Taliban commander behind those assaults, they tracked his travel back and forth across the nearby border with Tajikistan, a Russian intelligence stronghold, according to current and former senior Afghan security officials. Kunduz is also the base of operations for two Afghan businessmen who American intelligence officials say acted as [middlemen in the bounty scheme](#) between Russian intelligence officers and Taliban fighters.

The Amu Darya forms the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

U.S. officials say they confronted Russia about its aid to the Taliban on several occasions, but their public claims lacked detail, and it never

amounted to a major issue. Russian officials said they received no documented evidence.

Three decades after the Soviet military withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's cultural, economic and personal ties in the country remain deep. When Russia has looked to exert influence, whether benign or otherwise, it has had a host of friends to call on: Soviet-trained generals who led the Afghan forces for years on American pay; businessmen who bragged of friendship with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia; politicians who kept homes in Moscow even as they grew rich on American contracts.

For much of the first decade of the war, the United States did not really have to worry about the deep Russian reach into Afghan society, as Mr. Putin's government was aligned with the American mission of defeating Al Qaeda and Islamist groups that Moscow also saw as a threat — including the Taliban.

Diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks show genuine attempts by both sides to coordinate efforts in Afghanistan. Russian officials spoke of a "collective fist" in the fight against terrorism, and urged unity "with one voice — the American voice."

Damage caused by a car bomb in Kabul, Afghanistan, last year. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

But as the war in Afghanistan dragged on, and the two powers took opposing sides in the crises in Syria and Ukraine, the Russians increasingly saw the U.S. mission as failed, and the American presence in the region as a threat.

American intelligence officials now date Russia's discreet outreach to the Taliban as beginning about eight years ago — around the time that Mr. Putin, after a four-year hiatus as prime minister, reassumed the presidency with a

more confrontational posture with the West.

The mistrust soon became intense enough that Russian officials accused the United States of playing a hand in the rise of an Islamic State chapter in Afghanistan around 2015, with many of its earliest fighters being extremist militants from Central Asia who yearned to bring a holy war against Russia.

At a meeting of the Russian Security Council in 2013, Mr. Putin said his country could no longer stand by in the face of failures by the United States and its partners.

"We need a clear action strategy, which will take into account different possible developments," Mr. Putin said at the meeting. "The task is to reliably protect the interests of Russia under any circumstances."

Leading the portfolio on the diplomatic front was [Zamir Kabulov](#), a veteran of the Soviet war in Afghanistan and reportedly a former Russian intelligence operative.

Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, during a memorial ceremony in Dagestan, Russia, last year for soldiers killed in conflicts. Pool photo by Alexey Nikolsky

Mr. Kabulov began publicly criticizing the United States for weaknesses in the Afghan government and for failing to rein in Islamist militancy there — and increasingly describing the Afghan Taliban as a national entity that posed no threat beyond the country's borders and could be worked with.

Reports increased about Taliban figures making trips to Russia. And just as the United States and Taliban were finalizing details of the American withdrawal, Russia brought the same Taliban leaders into [Moscow meetings](#) with a large number of Afghan political figures for discussions over the political future of the country.

As the United States has drawn down its military presence, it has increasingly relied on Afghan partners for intelligence and counterintelligence. What Afghan security officials were seeing in recent years, particularly in the north, was a deeply messy reality.

Around the time they began focusing more on Russian activities, the Afghans also unraveled an Iranian scheme of distributing arms to discontented warlords and militia commanders — the weapons were Russian, and the route was through Tajikistan, officials said. The Iranian scheme was short-lived, one senior Afghan official said, after Iran realized the weapons it was providing were turning up in the saturated black market.

The Russians often used the hundreds of millions of dollars in fuel imports for NATO and Afghan forces as a way to inject cash into Afghanistan to ensure influence and keep intelligence assets on their side. One former senior Afghan official said that instead of direct cash transfers, the Russians would mostly arrange for the convoys of oil tankers snaking into Afghanistan to be topped with extra fuel that would be cashed for circulation inside the country.

Though the countries of Central Asia gained their independence after the Soviet collapse, Russia has never let go of its foothold in the region. In one cable, a Russian diplomat described the borders of countries like Tajikistan, where the Russian Air Force still has about 7,000 troops, as “an extension of its own border.”

When the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan in 1990s, Tajikistan was a hub for the resistance commanders who received aid from Russia and Iran. In the 20 years since the U.S. invasion, the country has become a center of criminal traffic and vice, a kind of adult playground for many of the Afghan elite who frequently travel back and forth to Tajikistan and often have family

there.

Old Soviet tanks litter the grounds of Bala Hissar, outside Kunduz. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

In that mix of spies, money and mafia, the Taliban, too, found a foothold. The insurgents made a point of taking and maintaining control of some of the border crossings from Kunduz Province into Tajikistan. From the south of the country all the way to the north, they had border access to evade military pressure, maintain ties with friendly foreigners and keep a channel for [the opium trade that partly finances the insurgency](#).

Several Afghan officials, including Asadullah Omarkhel, who was the governor of Kunduz at the time, said they shared with the Americans intelligence that Mullah Abdul Salam, the Taliban commander who led the assaults on Kunduz, repeatedly crossed into Tajikistan for what they suspected were discussions with Russian agents. A [Tajik news outlet](#) reported meetings between Russian officials and Taliban commanders at a Russian air base in Tajikistan as early as 2015. And it was these border crossings that the Taliban used to bring weapons in, officials say.

Mr. Omarkhel said Americans initially were not confident about claims of Taliban ties to Russia, but then they started striking the Taliban bases along the border, including a strike that killed Mullah Salam.

At Thursday's congressional hearing, General Nicholson repeated his accusation of Russia arming the Taliban, noting that even though the aid was not extensive, it still had effect.

"In the northern part of Afghanistan, in particular in Kunduz, the Russian assistance did help the Taliban inflict higher casualties on the Afghan security forces and more hardship on the Afghan people," he said.

Najim Rahim, Eric Schmitt and Taimoor Shah contributed reporting.

US intelligence suspects Russia of supporting the Taliban



Anonymous sources within US intelligence services suggest that Russia provides weapons and military training to the Taliban in Afghanistan. The West also suspects that Moscow's support of the Taliban is guided by the Russia's desire to undermine the pro-American government in Kabul, as reported by *Rosbalt*.

According to information obtained by the Associated Press from US intelligence sources, evidence was found that Moscow supplied weapons to the Taliban in 2015, during the Islamic group's campaign to capture the city

of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan.

Russia allegedly provided the Taliban with Kalashnikovs automatic rifles with plastic butts, a model that is only manufactured in Russia. In addition, Moscow is thought to have supplied the militants with anti-tank grenade launchers.

"Russia also gave money and weapons to the Taliban so that they would fight against the Islamic State," the intelligence officials were quoted as saying.

"We are 100 percent confident that Russia supports certain elements among the Taliban and encourages them to operate near Afghanistan's northern border, where they can easily get reinforcements from Tajikistan and act as a buffer against ISIS," the sources added.

In December, an unnamed Taliban field commander told the British *Sunday Times* that Russian President Vladimir Putin held a meeting in September with the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansour. The meeting allegedly took place at a military base in Tajikistan. According to the *Sunday Time's* source, Putin promised to supply the Taliban with modern weapons and financial support in exchange for cooperation which would "meet the interests of Moscow".

In September of last year, Putin participated in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) summit in Dushanbe, where he affirmed his dedication to the fight against international terrorism. An unnamed Kremlin official said that the allegations of Putin's meeting with Mansour are groundless.

[Russia](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Taliban](#)

Comments

Russia, Taliban share intelligence in fight against ISIS

ISIS leader seemingly breaks silence

02:10

Putin vows to share ISIS intelligence with Taliban

02:00

Man convicted after threat to Prince George

01:54

Fears of a new frontier in terror

04:32

Mosul survivors search for loved ones

02:52

Inside former ISIS jails in Raqqa

02:06

Hunting for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

01:46

ISIS used stadium as prison

02:31

Walking through the ruins of Raqqa

03:06

Kidnapped Yazidi boy raised by American ISIS mother

01:48

Exclusive GoPro footage inside Raqqa conflict

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CNN inside Raqqa, former ISIS stronghold

01:25

Why Raqqa matters

01:13

How ISIS is evolving

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Raqqa drone video shows ISIS execution square

02:38

ISIS leader seemingly breaks silence

02:10

Putin vows to share ISIS intelligence with Taliban

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Fears of a new frontier in terror

Story highlights

Washington CNN — none

A U.S. commander has told Congress ISIS may have 3,000 fighters in Afghanistan

Vladimir Putin has long worried about jihadists from Russia's Caucasus region going to Syria

Russian President Vladimir Putin is turning to an old enemy – the Taliban – to share intelligence as the number of ISIS fighters grow in regional neighbor Afghanistan.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the contact between Moscow and the Afghan Taliban only involves intelligence-sharing and information exchange regarding the fight against ISIS.

Why would Putin put himself in a risky spot by working with the Taliban? He's aligning himself with the enemy of his enemy.

A U.S. commander last month told Congress that ISIS has gained strength in Afghanistan in recent months, with as many as 3,000 fighters there.

Putin has long worried about thousands of jihadists from Russia's Caucasus region and the former Soviet republics going to fight with ISIS in Syria.

[Afghan forces on offensive against Taliban in Sangin](#)

He may be trying to cut off the pipeline of fighters closer to home, in Afghanistan, one expert told CNN.

"The ties between ISIS and the insurgency in the north Caucasus, the fact that there are people from the north Caucasus fighting in Syria – maybe not

as many as the Russian government says, but certainly a good number, including in leadership roles – means that Russia does see ISIS and a lot of the other Islamist groups as a particular threat, in a way that maybe the Taliban isn't," said Olga Olier of the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) in Washington. "So the Russians may think they (the Taliban) are the lesser of the available evils."

Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling, a CNN military analyst, said a map shows the situation, with Afghanistan bordered on the north by former Soviet republics Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and Kazakhstan between those nations and Russia.

[Blair: We live with the 'pain' of Iraq, Afghanistan wars](#)

"Russia and Mr. Putin are very concerned about the passage of terrorists, insurgents, Islamists between those borders," Hertling said.

Working with the Taliban presents some risk for Putin, who has been boldly extending his reach with aggressive moves in Syria, Ukraine and with North Korea.

For their part, the Taliban issued a statement Friday denying any contact with the Russian government. The Taliban denied needing any help in the fight against ISIS but maintained they had the right to request assistance from other nations.

Analysts said Putin's moves are all about projecting relevance and strength.

"He wants to go back to the 1970s, when the Soviet Union and the United States were equals as geopolitical leaders, as Cold War rivals, but they still sat down and they did deals," said Matthew Rojansky of the [Woodrow Wilson Center](#).

Former CIA counterterrorism official Philip Mudd concurs, calling Putin's a "pretty serious power grab." Putin is seeking to enhance his relationships with those former Soviet republics.

"What Putin is doing now is telling those states, 'I will work with the Taliban to ensure that we have an agreement to collect intelligence about ISIS before they come across the border,' " Mudd said. " 'When I collect that intelligence, I will pass it back to you.' This is as much about restoring those relationships and trust with the central Asian republics and competing with the United States as it is about countering ISIS in Afghanistan."

The emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan is another major worry – not only to Russia but also to the United States. Much of the violence in the country wracked by war and an insurgency has involved the Taliban. But al Qaeda – which, led by the late Osama bin Laden, called Afghanistan home before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks – continues to be a threat.

A U.S. State Department official told CNN when asked for comment on the Russian-Taliban agreement: "Russia and other regional actors all have a shared interest in supporting the continued security and increased stability of Afghanistan. We hope that we can continue to find ways to work with Russia to promote Afghanistan's security and stability."

Another U.S. official told CNN that Washington doesn't see this action as undermining the stability it is working with the Afghan government to achieve. But what would be destabilizing, the official said, is any contact with the Taliban that would legitimize the group with international recognition.

Moscow addressed Russian media reports about Russia supplying weapons to fighters in Afghanistan.

The only weapons that would be transferred on a commercial basis would go

directly to the Afghan government and would not involve the Taliban because of sanctions against the group, said Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman. Russia "strictly follows the sanctions regime against the Taliban," she said.

CNN's Matthew Chance in Moscow, Masoud Popalzai in Kabul, Afghanistan, and Laura Koran contributed to this report.

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

BY

GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON

COMMANDER

U.S. FORCES – AFGHANISTAN

BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

ON

THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

FEBUARY 9, 2017

Final Version

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Afghanistan Today: The Role of the U.S. and a State of Positive Equilibrium

Our primary mission remains to protect the homeland by preventing Afghanistan from being used again as a safe haven for terrorists to attack the United States or our allies. U.S. counterterrorism operations this year killed five combatants who were emirs of terrorist or violent extremist organizations (VEO), including Al-Qa'ida (AQ) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIL-K). Of the 98 U.S. - designated terrorist organizations globally, 20 are located in the Afghanistan - Pakistan region. This constitutes the highest concentration of terrorist groups anywhere in the world and demonstrates the importance of this mission.

Complementing the U.S. counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan is NATO's Resolute Support Mission. This operation, the largest and longest in NATO's history, focuses on training, advising, and assisting (TAA) the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Afghan Security Institutions (ASI) to achieve a secure and stable Afghanistan. In 2016 the ANDSF executed their first post-International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) strategy and prevailed in combat against an externally enabled enemy. With the help of Resolute Support TAA and U.S. expeditionary advising and combat enablers, the ANDSF prevented the Taliban from achieving any of their major objectives. The ANDSF's ability to face simultaneity and complexity on the battlefield signals growth in capability. The Afghan Air Force (AAF) was essential to Afghan operations in 2016, but is in dire condition due to an extremely high operational tempo and complications in helicopter maintenance and spare parts availability due to sanctions. Without an AAF transition initiative, the risk to the overall mission success

from a lack of organic aerial mobility and fires will rise for the remainder of 2017 and beyond, putting the ANDSF at risk.

We remain concerned about multiple critical factors, specifically the stability of the Afghan government, ANDSF casualties, the influence of external actors on Afghanistan, including Pakistan, Russia, and Iran, and the convergence of the 20 terrorist groups and three VEOs operating in the region. Other non-military factors such as the economy, governance and corruption, demographics, reconciliation and reintegration, and the influence of the narcotics trade also affect this mission and underscore the need to employ all instruments of U.S. national power with those of our Allies and partners.

We assess the current security situation in Afghanistan as a stalemate where the equilibrium favors the government. Leadership and countering corruption are two areas in which the ANDSF must improve to reduce casualties and increase military capability.

Two Missions: U.S. Counterterrorism and NATO Train, Advise, Assist

Our primary objective is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven for terrorists to again attack the United States and our Allies.¹ We work with our NATO Allies, operational partners, and the international community to achieve our remaining objective of a sovereign, secure, stable, and unified Afghanistan.² We execute two narrow, but complementary missions to achieve these objectives:

1. Counterterrorism (CT) consisting of unilateral operations against AQ and its associates and the ISIL-K. We also conduct U.S.- Afghan advise, enable, and

¹ Statement by President Obama on Afghanistan, The White House, 6 July 2016.

² Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," 1 December 2016.

partner operations against other threats and have the shared goal of the defeat of AQ and ISIL-K. Our regional Central Asia South Asia (CASA) CT platform and training, advising, and assistance of Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) keep pressure on the terrorist groups in this region, at least half of whom have regional and transnational ambitions.

2. Train, advise, and assist (TAA). U.S. forces execute the TAA mission as part of the 39 nation NATO-led coalition Resolute Support (RS) mission to develop the ASI and ANDSF. A capable and sustainable ANDSF is critical to the independent defense of Afghan sovereignty and deterring long-term instability. It also enables our CT operations and maintains pressure on VEO and irreconcilable insurgent elements who threaten the stability of Afghanistan and the region.

A Year of Key U.S. and International Policy Decisions Supporting Afghanistan

Three crucial U.S. decisions enabled policy success in 2016. First, the decision to strike Taliban Emir Mullah Mansour caused leadership and financial disruption within the Taliban. Next, the authority to use U.S. combat enablers in support of Afghan forces to achieve strategic effects enabled the success of certain ANDSF CT and counter insurgency operations. These combat enablers helped bridge capability gaps from the 2014 transition. Close air support and aerial mobility are the most critical remaining gaps that need to be addressed. Finally, the decision to maintain U.S. troop levels at 8,448 permitted us to restructure our command to advise all Army Corps and Police Zones going into next year. It also has enabled us to use expeditionary advising packages to provide tailored support to the regional ANDSF commands when required.

The cumulative effect of these decisions saw an ANDSF that prevailed in 2016 and prevented the Taliban from achieving any of their major objectives, helped renew international commitment at the NATO Warsaw Summit and EU-hosted Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, and provided great confidence to the people and government of Afghanistan.

At the July 2016 Warsaw Summit, 39 NATO Allies and Resolute Support coalition members, representing one-fifth of the global community, remained committed to providing forces for the Resolute Support Mission beyond 2016. In addition to planned U.S. support, 30 other nations pledged more than \$800M annually to fund the ANDSF until the end of 2020. In late September, India added \$1B to the \$2B it already committed to Afghanistan's development. Seventy-five countries and 26 international organizations met in October for the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan where they confirmed their intention to provide \$15.2B for the period 2017-2020 in support of Afghanistan's development needs. These commitments show the U.S. and international community's resolve to stand by our Afghan partners by continuing capacity building for sustainability and strengthening the fight against terrorism.

Protecting the U.S. Homeland through Counterterrorism Operations

U.S. counterterrorism forces conducted over 350 operations against AQ and ISIL-K in 2016 and killed the emirs of five terror and violent extremist organizations, to include Faruq al-Qatari, the Al-Qa'ida emir for Eastern Afghanistan, along with his deputy, Bilal al Utaybi. As the external operations director, Faruq al-Qatari and his deputy were directly involved in planning threats against the U.S. in the last year. Nearly fifty AQ and

AQ affiliated leaders, facilitators, or key associates were also killed or captured and transferred to the Afghan government, and over 200 AQ and AQ affiliated fighters were killed. Of note, Afghanistan is a unique partner with a host-nation judicial system able to take custody of terrorists, prosecute them, and enter them into their penal system if convicted. Working in a partnered raid with Afghan commandos, our U.S. counterterrorism forces also rescued Haider Gailani, the kidnapped son of the former Pakistani Prime Minister, in a raid against AQ in Eastern Afghanistan.

Working closely with our Afghan partners, U.S. counterterrorism forces also conducted specific counter ISIL-K operations, named GREEN SWORD, during 2016. These operations killed approximately one-third of their fighters, including Emir Hafiz Sayed Khan, and reduced the territory they hold by two-thirds. U.S. forces destroyed two dozen command and control and training structures, disrupted financial support networks, and significantly reduced an ISIL-K sanctuary that existed in Nangarhar Province since early 2015 from nine to three districts.

Besides Mullah Mansour, Faruq al-Qatari and Hafiz Sayed Khan, there was also the strike against Hamidullah, the emir of the Islamic Jihad Union, and the strike against Omar Khalifa, emir of the Tariq Gidar Group. Omar Khalifa was the mastermind of multiple attacks in Pakistan, including the horrendous attack on the Peshawar Army Public School that killed 150 civilians, including 134 children, the attack on the Bacha Khan University that killed dozens of professors and students, and an attack on Badaber Air Force Base, killing Muslims at morning prayer.

Without a doubt, we are attaining our primary objective in Afghanistan. Our presence in Afghanistan in 2016 maintained critical pressure on terror networks to protect the homeland. U.S. counterterrorism forces will continue to target Al Qai'da and conduct a series of operations designed to defeat ISIL-K in 2017 and preclude the migration of terrorists from Iraq and Syria into Afghanistan.

ANDSF Planning for 2016: Developing a Sustainable Security Strategy

In 2015, the ANDSF developed their first post-ISAF strategy. Nested within a five year National Campaign Plan designed to incentivize reconciliation, the Sustainable Security Strategy prioritized efforts based upon a "hold-fight-disrupt" methodology. This methodology designated areas which the ANDSF would "Hold" to prevent the loss of major population centers and other strategic areas to the enemy, those for which the ANDSF would immediately "Fight" to retain and those areas where they would assume risk by only "Disrupting" the enemy if they appeared. The ANDSF designed their phased operational campaign plan, called Operation SHAFaq, to anticipate and counter the enemy's main and supporting efforts. This prioritization caused them to concentrate forces in more populous areas and remove forces from more remote, sparsely inhabited areas.

ANDSF Operations 2016: Tested and Prevailed

Two dynamics characterized the early months of 2016. First, the externally enabled Taliban fought through the winter months in an attempt to exhaust the ANDSF. However, this effort also depleted their own manpower and finances. Second, Afghanistan joined Pakistan, the U.S., and China to discuss peace and reconciliation as

the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG). However, in mid-March, Taliban Emir Mullah Mansour publically rejected participation in the process. On 12 April, they announced the start of their 2016 offensive, Operation Omari.

The ANDSF largely stayed on their campaign plan for the first half of 2016, successfully executing the first three phases of Operation SHAFaq from February through late July. In Phase I, they defended Kunduz, inflicting heavy casualties on local Taliban who desired a repeat of their October 2015 seizure of that provincial capital. The ANDSF transitioned to Phase II of Operation SHAFaq in June, and shifted their main effort to Helmand and Uruzgan. While suffering high casualties, the ANDSF successfully consolidated control over the most populous areas and defeated attempts at isolating provincial capitals. By mid-July, the ANDSF executed Phase III in which they shifted the main effort to southern Nangarhar Province for counter-ISIL-K operations.

In early August, the Taliban initiated multiple efforts to seize the provincial capitals of Lashkar Gah in Helmand and Kunduz City in Kunduz Province. Through the end of September, the Taliban tried again to isolate and seize these two cities, as well as Tarin Kot, the provincial capital of Uruzgan Province. With the help of U.S. Expeditionary Advising Packages (EAPs) using U.S. authorities and combat enablers, the ANDSF prevented the capture of any of these provincial capitals, a significant success in just their second year at the helm of the fight. Additionally, Afghan National Army (ANA) units executed clearing operations to reopen highways and maintain lines of communication between key regional population centers throughout this period.

Of the 34 provincial capitals, Kunduz was the primary target of the Taliban. Their third attack on this city in early October 2016 was timed to correlate to the Brussels Conference on Afghanistan and the one year anniversary of the fall of the city in 2015. On 6 October, the ANDSF fought four simultaneous, coordinated attacks on Lashkar Gah, Kunduz, Tarin Kot, and Farah City in Farah Province, and repelled them all. Between August and October, the ANDSF prevailed against a total of seven Taliban attacks on major Afghan cities.

Since the start of the Taliban's campaign in April, the ANDSF prevented them from accomplishing their stated strategic objective of overtaking provincial capitals. They were often unable to mass in large numbers because of Afghan and U.S. airpower instead resorting frequently to numerous small-scale attacks on checkpoints in their attempts to isolate cities and create panic. They exploited localized and temporary successes by depicting these events as major strategic shifts through the use of social media and propaganda. The ANDSF consistently retook district centers and population areas within days of a loss, whereas in 2015 it sometimes took them weeks to recover. While the number of high-profile attacks in Kabul was 25% lower than during the same time period last year, these terror attacks resulted in large numbers of civilian casualties. Despite promises to safeguard civilians the Taliban caused approximately two thirds of civilian casualties according to statistics provided by international organizations, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Critical Factors Affecting the Mission and Equilibrium Favoring the Government

The critical factors that can affect our mission are the stability of the Afghan government, ANDSF casualties, convergence of terrorists and violent extremist organizations in Afghanistan, and the influence of external actors on Afghanistan.

Reinforcing the stability of the Afghan government is a work in progress primarily led by the diplomatic community. The USFOR-A supporting effort has been to urge all political actors to not allow their political process to undermine the security gains made at such high cost. At the strategic level, Afghanistan is a moderate Islamic republic and arguably one of the most democratic nations in the region. The Government retains broad international community support, represented by the financial and security commitments through the 2020 timeframe of the Warsaw Summit and the Brussels Conference.

High ANDSF casualties remain a major concern, but thus far recruitment has generally kept pace with losses and attrition. The high losses have primarily resulted from poor leadership, tactics, and training, as well as corruption, which undermines combat effectiveness.

The convergence of individuals and groups among the 20 designated terrorist organizations and three VEOs is an ongoing threat. ISIL-K is illustrative of this, as its composition includes former Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and Afghan Taliban leaders as well as members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. These groups benefit from complementary capabilities and networks and require continuous pressure to prevent the emergence of a new, more virulent organization in which the new whole is more dangerous than the sum of the previous parts.

Afghanistan's geostrategic location invites the often malign interest and influence of several external actors. It sits at the geographic, political, and cultural crossroads of transnational terrorism, the volatile Pakistan-India border, the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, Iran, and China's One Belt, One Road initiative. The Taliban and Haqqani network are the greatest threats to security in Afghanistan. Their senior leaders remain insulated from pressure and enjoy freedom of action within Pakistan safe havens. As long as they enjoy external enablement, they have no incentive to reconcile. The primary factor that will enable our success is the elimination of external sanctuary and support to the insurgents. Russia has become more assertive over the past year, overtly lending legitimacy to the Taliban to undermine NATO efforts and bolster belligerents using the false narrative that only the Taliban are fighting ISIL-K. Similarly, neighboring Iran is providing support to the Taliban while also engaging the Afghan government over issues of water rights, trade, and security.

Afghanistan desires that outside actors will cooperate with rather than undermine the Afghan government to bolster its capability and legitimacy and not the insurgents. Iranian – Indian – Afghan cooperation over the Chabahar Port presents great economic potential. With over \$2B development aid executed since 2002, and another \$1B pledged in 2016, India's significant investments in Afghan infrastructure, engineering, training, and humanitarian issues will help develop Afghan human capital and long-term stability. China is a moderate influencer focused mainly on regional economic interests. Multiple witnesses have appeared before this body and testified that insurgents cannot be defeated while they enjoy external sanctuary and support from outside of the

national boundaries of the conflict area.³ External safe haven and support in Pakistan increases the cost to the United States in terms of lives, time, and money, and it advantages the enemy with the strategic initiative, allowing them to determine the pace and venue of conflict from sanctuary. Even within this dynamic, the situation in Afghanistan has reached a state of equilibrium that favors the Government. Neither the Taliban nor the ANDSF is currently capable of fundamentally altering the operational environment, which leaves the government in control of roughly two thirds of the population, the Taliban in control of approximately ten percent, and the rest contested.

The “Hold-Fight-Disrupt” methodology of the Sustainable Security Strategy shifted Afghan focus from control of terrain to population security this year. Another way to affect change in equilibrium is to encourage reconciliation of insurgents. The Afghan government-negotiated peace agreement with the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) has the potential to serve as a catalyst for similar settlements with the Taliban or portions of them. President Ghani is focused on the complex coordination required to successfully demobilize and reintegrate the HiG in 2017.

Importance of Leadership Development and Other Lessons Learned

2016 operations highlighted the greatest weakness of the Afghan security forces - poor leadership. Poor leadership occurs primarily because of patronage vice merit-based appointment, which is prevalent in the Police, but improving in the Army. The high quality of leadership within the Special Forces and, to an increasing extent the Air Force, demonstrates the art of the possible in building effective Afghan leaders from

³ Statement of ADM Michael Mullen, “U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq,” 22 September, 2011. Testimony of GEN John M. Keane, USA (Ret), “Emerging U.S. Defense Challenges and Worldwide Threats,” 6 December, 2016.

their sizeable youth population. Reforms to the appointment systems and leader development programs are beginning to now address these deficiencies.

Besides poor leadership, the widespread ANDSF use of static checkpoints is still the greatest contributing factor to increased casualties. There is significant social and political pressure to maintain these checkpoints around villages and along highways. However, the ANDSF are not trained in how to defend these small outposts, conduct local security patrols or ambush would-be attackers. We continue to stress checkpoint reduction and are seeing this begin within the Afghan Army.

Other weaknesses include poor sustainment of soldiers and police in the field, the lack of an operational readiness cycle, no collective training, and corruption that diverts needed support from fighting units. At the tactical level, the ANA needs to improve its integration of fires and air power, as well as cross-pillar integration between the ANA and Afghan National Police (ANP) to improve unity of effort and maximize available combat power, use established chains of command, and integrate intelligence into operations. With so many Afghan troops tied up on static checkpoints this year, units did not execute an Operational Readiness Cycle (ORC) in which they rotate troops through field duty, training and refit cycles. During the current Winter Campaign, units are establishing these cycles, and we have observed an increased focus on company-level collective training and leadership development over the past 4 months. USFOR-A is working with the Ministry of Defense (MoD) to counter corruption within the personnel system through the biometric enrollment and improved accountability procedures. As of 1 January 2017, USFOR-A is limiting dispersal of funds for salaries to cover only the number of individuals who are biometrically enrolled.

Despite these shortcomings, there are some areas of success within the Ministry of Interior (MoI). The number of female officers has increased to nearly 3,000 and gender integration in the MoI outpaces the MoD. The ineffectiveness at the ministerial level should not detract from the bravery and skill demonstrated by the special police units. Crisis Response Unit 222 responds to all high profile attacks in Kabul. It successfully contained the terror attack against the American University in Kabul on 24 August, saving the lives of over 60 hostages and hundreds more who were trapped on the university grounds. This same unit also responded to the 11 October twin attacks against Shia mosques, rescuing 70 hostages.

Offensive Capability: The Afghan Special Forces and Air Force

While the MoD has many challenges as well, primarily in the areas of procurement, logistics, and leadership, there are numerous successes. The professionalism and competence of the Afghan National Army Special Operations Command is the most noteworthy. These 17,000 special operators conduct 70% of ANA offensive operations and are the best example of success in 2016. The regeneration of this force and their role as a catalyst for improvement of the Army are critical objectives for the winter campaign. The proficiency of the ASSF is directly attributable to their long-standing and consistent partnership with U.S. and coalition advisors who train, advise, assist and partner for specific operations down to the tactical level (company and battalion) and up to the operational level (division and corps). Competent ASSF are the result of extensive international investment in time, funding, and personnel. The capability and capacity of the ASSF will ensure Afghanistan cannot again be used as a safe haven from which trans-regional terrorists can threaten the U.S. and international partners.

Coalition advisors anticipate the ASSF will make strides in the coming years in critical warfighting functions, but this will require the continuation of persistent coalition training and advising, as well as the security assistance funding we provide them.

Another key to future success is the Afghan Air Force (AAF). Although still limited in number of aircraft and crews, since the beginning of the 2016, the AAF has added 26 strike aircraft, consisting of 18 MD-530 attack helicopters and eight A-29 attack aircraft. Comparing 2016 to 2015, the AAF has increased organic strike missions by 268%.

Before March, the AAF had no dedicated fixed wing attack aircraft – in 2016, the Air Force added eight A-29s and nearly 120 Afghan Tactical Air Controllers to improve the combat capability of the ANDSF. The first A-29 strike mission was flown on 14 April 2016. In the remainder of 2016, the AAF dropped over 430 bombs. Nearly 20 air crews were added to the force this year and their training and education in U.S. schools helped further professionalize their force. These Afghan pilots demonstrated sound judgment, good flying skills and the courage to dissent when there was risk of civilian casualties. The AAF also demonstrated the ability to integrate the new national targeting process with A-29s, MD-530s and ScanEagle ISR platforms to attack insurgent targets. Afghan Special Security Forces rely on the Afghan Special Mission Wing, which is fully night-vision goggle qualified and enables them to conduct night time operations anywhere in the country, bolstering national counterterrorism efforts.

The extremely rugged and mountainous terrain in Afghanistan requires the ANDSF to have an organic aerial mobility and fires capability. Aerial mobility enables offensive action through the rapid movement of troops in advance of enemy maneuver, provides critical resupply over impassible terrain, and permits the rapid medical evacuation of

wounded Soldiers. Aerial fires provide prompt overmatch fire support to friendly troops in contact with the enemy. Air support affects the entire range of the campaign from operational maneuver to Soldier morale and is the most critical enabler for our partners.

The U.S. government is considering a critical AAF initiative to replace the unsustainable Russian-manufactured aircraft fleet and make up for combat losses in Afghan transport helicopters by providing U.S. Army UH-60s. The Department of Defense submitted a funding request in November 2016 to begin this transition. While making steady progress, a fully operational AAF is still some years away. Of note, it will take approximately 21 months from the initial approval decision to field the first refurbished and upgraded UH-60. Deferring funding decisions any further widens the critical Afghan aerial capability gap as the Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters attrite and UH-60s are not available until the 2019 campaign. This will require U.S. aviation and authorities to bridge the gap and pushes the arrival of these critical AAF helicopters and additional strike aircraft until later in the Warsaw Summit time frame, which puts attainment of our campaign objective at serious risk.

In the 2015, USFOR-A recommended a wargame to “provide a projection of the ANDSF’s level of success as it continues to have responsibility for the security of Afghanistan.” From March to August 2016, the USFOR-A staff, in partnership with the Center for Army Analysis (CAA), conducted a study of various combinations of ground force structures and AAF aerial mobility and fires options. The study team recommended retention of the 352,000 authorized Afghan force structure through 2020, with full implementation of an AAF initiative and lifecycle replacement of armored HMMWVs (“Humvees”) in the ANDSF to enhance air and ground mobility of forces on

the battlefield. This option, which sustains an effective ANDSF, is the most likely to succeed given the expected threat environment and projected ANDSF capabilities.

Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) conducted a Tactical Wheeled Vehicle Optimization study in 2016 in support of the MoD and MoI Tashkil (i.e., official manning document) with a focus on creating a sustainable, affordable, and effective fleet that increases combat capability and force protection for occupants. In concert with the results of the subsequent wargame, CSTC-A will only sustain 53 percent of the current vehicles. Those vehicles specifically identified for termination of CSTC-A resourced sustainment are predominately pickup trucks and other unarmored vehicles not designed for combat and military vehicles that are uneconomical for continued Coalition sustainment. This reduced fleet maintains HMMWVs and Mobile Strike Force Vehicles in order to maintain protected mobility and force protection.

Countering Corruption with Afghan Partners

More than any other factor, corruption drains critical resources and undermines combat effectiveness. During the last several months, we have pushed both the ANA and ANP to conduct Personnel Asset Inventories (PAIs) to account for every employee, by ensuring they are properly enrolled in the Afghan Human Resources Information Management System (AHRIMS). USFOR-A notified both MoD and MoI Ministers that beginning on 1 January 2017, we will only fund the actual monthly Afghan Local Police⁴ and ANA payroll disbursements reflecting the number of validated personnel. CSTC-A will field the Afghan Personnel and Pay System (APPS) in 2017 to automate much of

⁴ The ANP is funded by the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) using the Web-based Electronic Payroll System (WEPS). We have begun negotiations with LOTFA to implement the same standards in the MoI.

the pay process, and dramatically reduce human error and remove opportunities for fraudulent and corrupt behavior within the payroll system.

President Ghani is strongly committed to reforms within both security ministries and is committed to fighting corruption. The recent arrest or suspension of senior Mol officials as a consequence of corruption investigations is a start. With the help of the international community, the Government established the Anti-Corruption Justice Center in 2016, which has already tried, convicted, and sentenced senior Afghan officials for corruption. After corruption in the supply system was identified as a major cause of casualties this year, President Ghani directed the replacement of over 700 personnel in the logistics system in order to reduce criminal network penetration.

Winter Campaign 2016 – 2017: Leadership, Training, and Sustainment

The ongoing ANDSF Winter Campaign (Operation SHAFaq II) is focused on leader development, collective training, personnel accountability, establishment of an operational training cycle, and sustainment at all levels. CSTC-A has assessed each of the Corps for its regeneration requirements, with ASSF as the top priority.

Leadership, training, and sustainment will have the largest impact on reducing the high number of ANDSF casualties that occurred this year. Leadership in particular is the key to progress. As with corruption, President Ghani is committed to reforming leader development and recently authorized a merit-based High Oversight Board to appoint ANDSF Senior Officers. In the fall of 2016, the ANA selected a new Sergeant Major of the Army in the first ever merit-based senior leader selection. It has since expanded this

process to the selection of two Command Sergeants Major for ANA Corps and is supporting a USFOR-A study to improve general officer selection and management.

To best translate the 2017-2020 Warsaw Summit timeline into success, President Ghani has directed the implementation of an Afghan four-year "Roadmap" to increase ANDSF fighting capabilities, which will expand Afghan government control of the population and incentivize reconciliation.

Optimizing USFOR-A Structure to Meet Objectives

In planning for the transition from 9,800 to 8,448 troops, we optimized the force structure to provide four TAA commands, an increase by two. We are reorganizing our advisory teams to create training and sustainment sections in each to teach the ANDSF "how to train" and "how to sustain."

To address ANDSF casualties, we continue to advise the ANA Medical Command, the ANP Office of the Surgeon General, and the Afghan Air Force Surgeon General on medical care and evacuation. Our new structure includes TAA at the Train, Advise, and Assist Command level for point of injury medical care and en route care.

Based on lessons learned from 2015, we recognized the need for expeditionary advising. EAPs consist of approximately 130 personnel and are self-sufficient for roughly three weeks. This provides three possible employment options: advising Afghan Brigade or Provincial Police elements during particularly important operations; extending TAA when Corps and Police Zone leadership travels away from the headquarters; and advising on collective training, extending TAA to SOF elements away

from their bases, or even advising such non-combat missions as assessing infrastructure vulnerabilities.

Other USFOR-A organizational changes include the regeneration of counter-corruption capabilities. When USFOR-A transitioned to OPERATION FREEDOM'S SENTINEL in early 2015, we divested key capabilities and lost the ability "see ourselves" to prevent diversions of money for fraudulent or corrupt purposes. We are establishing a resident counter-corruption finance cell to ensure U.S. and Coalition Forces funds allocated to the Afghan government are used appropriately as well as prevent corruption in conjunction with U.S. contracting.

USFOR-A is working with the ANDSF on organizational changes to deliver greater mobility. Through structured wargames run at the U.S. Army's Center for Army Analysis, we examined various ANDSF organizational models against the insurgency over time. These wargames suggest that by the end of 2019, we could achieve a "tipping point" in terms of ANDSF mobility and strength to secure a critical mass of the population and relegate the enemy to remote areas where they can be disrupted by either our CT platform or an improved ASSF.

Looking Ahead: A Critical Partner in a Volatile Region

Our primary mission remains CT and protection of the homeland. Afghanistan serves as a critical partner and platform from which we combat AQ and ISIL and maintain pressure on the convergence of 20 terrorist groups and three VEOs in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

ANDSF progress is not as rapid or as uniform as we would like, and in order to further improve corruption and poor leadership must be addressed. Critical risks that could cause mission failure remain and we must learn from the hard lessons of 2016.

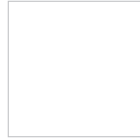
The current security situation is a stalemate where the equilibrium favors the government. The Afghan government is further refining its Sustainable Security Strategy and operational concept to gradually increase the government's security of the population for the period 2017-2020 and beyond. With continued TAA and U.S. operational authorities, an increasingly capable ANA, led by its ANASOC and a capable, robust AAF, will begin the growth of governmental control and the corresponding push of the Taliban into the remote regions. However, success will be dependent on eliminating external support to Afghanistan's enemies.

The ANDSF were tested and prevailed in 2016 and earned the trust and confidence of the Afghan people. 76% of the population expressed confidence in their security forces and 87% believed a return to Taliban rule would be bad for Afghanistan. 2017 will be a important juncture for Afghanistan as renewed international commitment to the Government and the Resolute Support Mission provides an opportunity to reinforce improvements demonstrated by the ANDSF in execution of the 2016 Campaign.

The payoff is the reduction of terrorist threats to the homeland and an increasingly stable and critical partner in this volatile but important region.

Russia 'arming the Afghan Taliban', says US

23 March 2018



[Justin Rowlatt](#)

Chief environment correspondent

[@BBCJustinR](#)

Gen John Nicholson: "We know that the Russians are involved"

Russia is supporting and even supplying arms to the Taliban, the head of US forces in Afghanistan has told the BBC.

In an exclusive interview, Gen John Nicholson said he'd seen "destabilising activity by the Russians."

He said Russian weapons were smuggled across the Tajik border to the Taliban, but could not say in what quantity. Russia has denied such US allegations in the past, citing a lack of evidence.

But the new claims come at a sensitive time in Russia's ties with Nato powers.

[Britain and Russia are locked in a dispute](#) over claims that Russia was behind an attack on a former Russian spy and his daughter on UK soil using a deadly nerve agent.

Meanwhile a US Congressional Intelligence Committee has just published a

report concluding that Russian provocateurs meddled in the 2016 election.

- [Russian spy: What we know so far](#)
- [US punishes Russians over vote meddling](#)
- [Russia denies supplying the Taliban](#)

"We see a narrative that's being used that grossly exaggerates the number of Isis [Islamic State group] fighters here," Gen Nicholson told BBC News. "This narrative then is used as a justification for the Russians to legitimise the actions of the Taliban and provide some degree of support to the Taliban."

"We've had stories written by the Taliban that have appeared in the media about financial support provided by the enemy. We've had weapons brought to this headquarters and given to us by Afghan leaders and said, this was given by the Russians to the Taliban," he continued. "We know that the Russians are involved."

Much of Gen Nicholson's career has been spent in the conflict in Afghanistan. He narrowly escaped death when his office in the Pentagon was destroyed by one of the 9/11 planes and the US campaign in Afghanistan has shaped his career ever since.

He believes this direct Russian involvement with the Taliban is relatively new. He says Russia has conducted a series of exercises on the Afghan border with Tajikistan. "These are counter terrorism exercises," says Gen Nicholson, "but we've seen the Russian patterns before: they bring in large amounts of equipment and then they leave some of it behind."

The implication is that these weapons and other equipment are then smuggled across the border and supplied to the Taliban.

Gen Nicholson meets an Afghan commando

Gen Nicholson's military career has been shaped by the conflict in Afghanistan

The general admits it is hard to quantify how much support Russia is actually giving the Taliban, but senior Afghan police officers and military figures have told the BBC that it includes night vision goggles, medium and heavy machine guns as well as small arms.

Afghan sources say these weapons are likely to have been used against Afghan forces and the Nato advisers who support them on some combat missions.

However, Russia is not an obvious ally of the Taliban. The Soviet Union fought a bitter war against the US-backed mujahedin after it invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Many of those same mujahedin fighters joined the Taliban when it was formed during the civil war that followed the humiliating Russian withdrawal in 1989.

The Taliban's enmity towards Russia was enduring, says Kate Clark of the

Afghanistan Analysts Network: "The Taliban always castigated the Northern Alliance for dealing with Russia," she says.

It may be that now Russian and Taliban interests are becoming more closely aligned, she speculates.

US military plane over Afghanistan



US combat operations against the Taliban officially ended in 2014

President Trump has been pressuring Pakistan to sever its links with the Taliban. In January he suspended hundreds of millions of dollars of security aid after complaining on Twitter that Pakistan had "given us nothing but lies & deceit" and accusing it of providing "safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan".

The Taliban is also keen to distance itself from Pakistan and demonstrate that it is an independent force. That makes finding new funding lines and international backers important.

Russia, meanwhile, denies providing weapons or funds to the Taliban but has admitted that it has had talks with the insurgent group. It justified that on the basis of the shared opposition to the Islamic State group, which has been trying to establish a base in the north-east of Afghanistan.

However Russia may well believe there are wider geo-political benefits to be had from supporting the Taliban.

When I asked Gen Nicholson whether he thought that Russia was fighting a proxy war against America in Afghanistan he didn't address the question directly.

"This activity really picked up in the last 18 to 24 months," he replied. "Prior to that we had not seen this kind of destabilising activity by Russia here. When you look at the timing it roughly correlates to when things started to heat up in Syria. So it's interesting to note the timing of the whole thing."

RUSSIAN BOUNTIES ON U.S. TROOPS: WHY HASN'T THE ADMINISTRATION
RESPONDED?

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HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

JULY 9, 2020

Serial No. 116-119

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RUSSIAN BOUNTIES ON U.S. TROOPS: WHY HASN'T THE ADMINISTRATION

RESPONDED?

Thursday, July 9, 2020

House of Representatives,
Committee on Foreign Affairs,

Washington, DC

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:03 p.m., via WebEx, Hon. Joaquin Castro [acting chairman of the committee], presiding.

Mr. Castro [presiding]. The Committee on Foreign Affairs will come to order.

Without objection, the chair is authorized to declare a recess of the committee at any point, and all members will have 5 days to submit statements, extraneous material, and questions for the record, subject to the length limitation in the rules. To insert something into the record, please have your staff email the previously mentioned address or contact full committee staff.

Please keep your video function on at all times, even when you are not recognized by the chair. Members are responsible for muting and unmuting themselves, and please remember to mute yourself after you finish speaking. Consistent with House Resolution 965 and the accompanying regulations, staff will only mute members and witnesses as appropriate when they are not under recognition to eliminate background noise.

I see that we have a quorum.

And I will now recognize myself for opening remarks.

We meet today to discuss reporting that Russia put bounties on the heads of American and allied troops, Russian cash pouring into the Taliban's coffers in exchange for American lives. While we are going to steer clear of discussing any classified information in this hearing, I think I am on safe ground to say that these allegations and claims were never denied by the White House. Russia's actions, if true, are unacceptable. The American people are demanding answers and they are demanding accountability.

This hearing is also a reminder that America's longest war, now approaching nearly two decades of continued conflict, still wages on in Afghanistan. Bringing the 9/11 terrorists to justice was an imperative, but few would argue today that U.S. national security interests are being served by this endless war.

Just this past week, a young soldier from my hometown of San Antonio died in a vehicle rollover accident, Vincent Sebastian Ibarria. He was 21 years old and dreamed of becoming a nurse after serving in the Army. I express my condolences to his family and to the more than 2,000 American families who lost a loved one during this conflict. We need to bring this endless war to a close.

Today, this committee looks to answer an important foreign policy question: why has Russia faced no consequences, not even a public rebuke, from the Trump administration? We invited Secretary Pompeo to testify today. He refused, which is what we have come to expect from this Secretary of State. While he makes plenty of time for interviews on Fox News and seems to relish bullying fact-based journalists from the State Department press room, he rarely, if ever, summons the courage to answer questions from his former colleagues in the House of Representatives, as every other Secretary of State before him has done.

Russia is not our friend. Vladimir Putin is not a partner of the United States. He is a dictator who just last week extended his tenure to 2036. He has robbed his people of their rights. He has trampled on the sovereignty of his neighbors. He

has used the resources of the Russian government to undermine democracy, splinter NATO and the EU, and bolster other despots like Assad. His tools are disinformation, violent suppression, and assassination. All of that is contemptible enough, but putting a price on American heads is a serious escalation.

Exactly how the intelligence on this matter was presented to the President is still unclear. The Trump administration's excuses keep changing. Perhaps it was within his briefing, but that does not necessarily mean the briefers briefed him on it, because it is widely known that President Trump does not read the Presidential Daily Briefing. Or maybe they did not brief him because the intelligence was, quote-unquote, ``disputed,' even though only intelligence that is of major significance makes it into the Presidential Daily Briefing. Per usual with President Trump, we are a long, long way from the buck stops here.

Even if the administration's explanations are true, it paints a picture of incompetence at the highest levels of our national security apparatus. But what troubles me the most from a foreign policy perspective is what this White House did and did not do once it received this information. Was there a public condemnation of Russia and Vladimir Putin from the Trump administration? Did the State and Treasury Departments slap sanctions on Russian officials involved in the plot? Did the Taliban, with whom we have been at war for nearly two decades, pay a price? What are the State and Defense Departments doing to protect our service members and how are they working with our NATO allies who are contributing to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan with us to address this threat? None of that. As a matter of fact, this President kept doing what he has been doing since even before he was elected, cozying up to Vladimir Putin.

Since the United States reportedly obtained this intelligence, President Trump has released a joint statement with Vladimir Putin, directed the purchase of faulty Russian ventilators, and withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, a critical part of monitoring Russian military activity. He also ordered the reduction of America's troop presence in Germany, an act that was met with bipartisan rebuke and criticism from our allies, but with praise from the Russians. He even wanted to expand the G-7 to include Russia again, which was expelled from the group in 2014 following Putin's illegal annexation of Crimea. It is almost as if President Trump is on a mission to make Russia great again.

This issue is also not without precedent. In 2011, the Obama Administration discovered that Pakistani intelligence officers urged Taliban-affiliated militants to attack the U.S. embassy and a NATO headquarters in Kabul. How did the Obama Administration respond? Secretary Clinton and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Mike Mullen, confronted Pakistani officials and publicly shamed them for these actions, even though we were relying on Pakistan for certain access into Afghanistan. Admiral Mullen called the Haqqani Network a ``veritable arm of Pakistani's intelligence agency.' White House officials stood up for Americans and the troops who were in harm's way.

The way this administration tries to distort reality and gaslight the American people is, frankly, a page right out of Vladimir Putin's playbook. But the facts are clear. The Trump administration failed in its most sacred duty, to keep Americans safe.

I hope that our witnesses can help us navigate all of this today and provide some ideas and insight about what our policy should look like under these circumstances. But, before I turn to the witnesses, I want to recognize Ranking Member Mike McCaul of Texas for his opening remarks.

Mr. McCaul. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I hope everybody can hear me okay. Thank you for calling this important hearing.

As I have said time and time again--and I agree with the chairman that Vladimir Putin is not our friend, not a friend to the United States or our allies. In the past few years, we have witnessed his regime invade and occupy parts of Ukraine and Georgia, unleash devastating cyber attacks against our allies, use a banned nerve agent to try to kill a former Russian spy in the UK, prop up corrupt regimes in Syria and Venezuela. They meddled in our elections. They undermine American interests around the world. He has proven he just cannot be trusted and he certainly is not our friend.

And now, we are faced with widely reported allegations that a Russian military intelligence unit, the GRU, has paid Taliban-linked militants to kill Americans and coalition forces in Afghanistan. While it is not news that Moscow has provided the Taliban with weapons and other support--and they have been there since 1979--now Russia paying bounties for the murder of American service members would be an unacceptable escalation. If true, the administration, in my judgment, must take swift and serious action to hold the Putin regime accountable, and that should include not inviting Russia to rejoin the G-7.

We have passed, Mr. Chairman, as you know, sanctions that the administration can enact today on these Russian entities. Ultimately, there is nothing more important than protecting our American troops serving overseas. I think we can all agree we must take any threat to their safety seriously, especially from someone with a track record like Putin.

I hope we use our time today to discuss how to more effectively deal with the dangerous autocrat in the Kremlin rather than descending into a partisan blame game. The only person who benefits from American infighting over this issue is Vladimir Putin. He loves chaos. And after last week's sham nationwide vote in Russia that allows Putin to remain in power through 2036, essentially, making him the emperor of Russia, it is even more critical for Americans to work together with our allies, especially through NATO, to counter Putin's nefarious activities around the world.

While the topic of this hearing will certainly center around Russia and Vladimir Putin, the backdrop is Afghanistan. I urge my colleagues to continue supporting our partners in Afghanistan to help bring peace and stability to their country.

My friend, Ambassador Rahmani, has devoted herself to helping secure that future for Afghanistan, and I want to take this opportunity to thank her for her unwavering dedication to that mission. And I think it is very commendable that Afghanistan appoint a female Ambassador to the United States, and I hope that she will be made a part of the negotiating team when they meet with the Taliban.

I would also like to note that I appreciate the White House quickly providing briefings on today's topic on both sides of the aisle, including myself, the chairman, and other members of the committee. And further, I know my colleagues want to get the full story. So, I would encourage them to read all the classified materials provided on this important matter to get the entire picture.

And so, finally, I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and our witnesses for their testimony. And with that, I yield back.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Ranking Member McCaul.

I am now going to introduce the witnesses who will testify to us.

Our first witness is Mr. Michael Morell, former Acting Director and Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. He is one of our Nation's leading national security

professionals and has been at the center of the Nation's fight against terrorism. He has worked to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and efforts to counter U.S. adversaries like Russia and China. He also was previously in charge of organizing the President's Daily Briefing under President George W. Bush.

Our next witness is Dr. Celeste Wallander, former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russia/Central Asia on the National Security Council. She is a leading expert on Russian foreign policy, security, defense, and military affairs, and is the current president and CEO of the U.S. Russia Foundation. Previously, Dr. Wallander also served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia at the Department of Defense, and was a professor at American University.

After her will be our witness General John Nicholson, a retired U.S. Army general and the former commander of the Afghan war effort, having led the 41-nation, NATO-led Resolute Support Mission and the United States Forces Afghanistan for more than two and a half years. His total U.S. Army career spanned over 36 years, with more than 12 of those years being spent at various NATO commands. He also serves as an adjunct faculty member on leadership with Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and is a member of Harvard's Belfer Center Elbe Group, which sustains Track 2 dialog between retired American and Russian senior officials for military and intelligence background.

And last, but not least, we have Mr. Ian Brzezinski, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Europe and NATO and national security affairs staffer in the Senate. Mr. Brzezinski is a leading expert on Europe and NATO with more than three decades of experience and government service. He is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on Strategy and Security and the Council's Future Europe Initiative.

Thank you all for being here. I will now recognize each witness for 5 minutes. And without objection, your prepared written statements will be made part of the record.

Mr. Morell.

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL MORELL, FORMER ACTING DIRECTOR AND DEPUTY DIRECTOR, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Mr. Morell. Chairman Castro, Ranking Member McCaul, and members of this distinguished committee, good afternoon. It is an honor for me to be here with you today, and it is also an honor for me to testify alongside my distinguished panelists.

Chairman, for the sake of time, I am going to summarize the written testimony that I submitted to the committee. What I want to focus on is what I know, which is how the collection, dissemination, and analytic processes of the intelligence community work; how the PDB process works; how the policy process on something like this would have worked at senior levels of the Bush and the Obama Administrations in which I spent much time in the Situation Room. So, with that in mind, I want to make eight points.

One, there is a misperception about who receives raw intelligence. Many assume that it only goes to intelligence community analysts who decide what to share, and in what context, with intelligence consumers. That perception is not accurate. Raw intelligence gets disseminated widely--to intelligence analysts, yes, but also to warfighters in the field and at the Pentagon, the policymakers at the State Department and the Defense Department, as well as to senior White House officials via the White House Situation Room. The

important point here is that many people would have already seen the raw intelligence as the analysts were just beginning their work on it.

Two, a key question with regard to the raw intelligence is whether it was clear to a reader what might be happening--that is, what the Russians might be doing with these bounties--or if it was possible to only see that by connecting a number of dots. I do not know what the case was here. But, even if it was only vaguely clear from the raw intelligence that the Russians might be paying bounties for the killing of American soldiers, that information would have made its way to the highest levels of the U.S. Government, including the President, before the analysts concluded their work.

Three, the lead IC agencies in assessing the information would have been the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the National Counterterrorism Center, for reasons that I outlined in my written testimony. The analysts would assess the information and they would come to two separate judgments. One, whether or not they believed Moscow was offering the bounties, and if they believed that, No. 2, their level of confidence in that judgment--low, medium, or high.

Four, if the analysts believed at any level of confidence that the Russians were providing the bounties, that judgment would be presented in the PDB. If the President does not read the PDB--and not all Presidents have--then it would have been briefed to him, if not by the President's briefer, then by the Director of National Intelligence or the Director of CIA, or even those senior administration officials who were aware of it, such as the National Security Advisor, the White House Chief of Staff, or the Vice President.

Five, contrary to what has been said by some, a dissent within the intelligence community on either the judgment itself or on the confidence level would not keep the piece out of the PDB. Rather, the dissent would be noted in the PDB piece.

Six, once the piece was in the PDB, the IC leadership on something of this significance would brief Congress as early as the same day as the piece ran in the PDB and certainly no later than the next day.

Seven, if the intelligence community assessed that the Russians were providing the bounties at any level of confidence, that would kick off a policy process inside the NSC staff on how the U.S. should respond. The analysts' level of confidence would make a difference to that process. A medium to high level of confidence would lead to a policy decision, I believe, on how to respond, while a low level of confidence would result in a decision that more intelligence was necessary before a policy decision could be made. I will leave it to General Nicholson to explain how the warfighters in Afghanistan would have reacted to the information and to the analysis at any level of confidence.

Eight, and finally, a medium-to-high-level confidence judgment that the Russians were offering the bounties would in every administration that I worked in--and I worked in six--have resulted in some sort of policy action designed to deter the Russians going forward. The safety of our troops would have required it.

Mr. Chairman, let me stop there, and I look forward to answering the committee's questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Morell follows:]

[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Mr. Morell.

I will now go to Dr. Wallander.

STATEMENT OF CELESTE WALLANDER FORMER SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE
PRESIDENT AND SENIOR DIRECTOR FOR RUSSIA/CENTRAL ASIA, NATIONAL
SECURITY COUNCIL

Dr. Wallander. Thank you. I thank the committee members for the invitation to contribute to your work. Today, I will summarize my written testimony, and for purposes of today's discussion, I will assume that the publicly reported details of the intelligence assessment are accurate.

These operations are embedded in a nearly decade-long Russian campaign of strategic competition that aims to weaken the United States and advance Russian power and influence. The Russian leadership recognizes that, while it is a peer to the United States in strategic nuclear capabilities, it does not match the United States in global power projection and in conventional military capabilities.

Russia seeks to compete where it has advantages in the asymmetric terrain and to avoid competition that could lead to its failure. Russia has invested in tools and methods to asymmetrically counter American advantages, whether those lie in extremist lies and social media, limited military interventions in Ukraine and Syria, cyber intrusions in networks and infrastructure abroad, or interfering in American and European politics.

Russia also deploys asymmetric tools to deny responsibility, however implausible that deniability has proven, in order to be able to operate with impunity and exploit ambiguities. This takes place in the phase zero end of the conflict spectrum, the sub-military conflict strategic environment in which diplomatic, informational, political, and economic conditions shape a country's capacity to secure its interests, short of active military confrontation.

The concept is not unique to Russian security doctrine, but its centrality and asymmetric nature is distinctive in Russian doctrine and operations. Russian asymmetric phase zero operations are conducted not only by political, but also Russian military actors, primarily Russian military intelligence, the GRU, and quasi-private actors such as the Wagner Group.

The earliest stages of operations in Ukraine in March 2014, political protests, were managed by GRU agents. The Russian operation to influence the U.S. 2016 Presidential election was a classic phase zero shaping operation, a mix of friendly foreign (WikiLeaks); quasi-private (Internet Research Agency); non-military; (the FSB), and Russian military actors.

The asymmetric phase zero framework helps to explain why the GRU has surfaced in a number of operations in Europe, the U.S., and now in Afghanistan. Across all of these cases, GRU operations are ambitious and sloppy. It is unlikely that President Putin personally approves every GRU operation. Yet, the GRU continues to operate, despite being exposed. This means that there is no question that it operates with political cover and approval at the highest levels of the Russian leadership, which is, therefore, responsible for these operations.

Why would the Russian leadership allow the GRU to play such a dangerous game? Because Russia has for years successfully managed asymmetric operations to keep the competition in spheres where it has operational advantages. It has exploited implausible deniability to operate in the asymmetric phase zero spectrum with impunity. Russia is succeeding.

In this specific case, it may be that Russia assessed that the Taliban was insufficiently active in striking coalition forces and needed incentives in order to hasten U.S. failure and withdrawal. It might be that Russia sought to complicate

the U.S.-Taliban relationship. Whatever the strange reasoning may have been, this crosses a threshold. Russia is seeking to exploit implausibly deniable asymmetric operations now directly against U.S. military forces.

The Russian government has gotten away with its phase zero operations because we are not well equipped to compete in the asymmetric space, because we tend to view these operations as political, not security competition, and because we have all allowed the implausibly deniable to be denied and explained away.

The result has been a creeping escalation and exploitation of asymmetric operations that thwart effective U.S. response. Caution is warranted. The other end of the conflict spectrum is mutually assured destruction. But caution does not require paralysis. The United States should build defenses against these operations, it should disrupt these operations, and it should directly hold the Russian leadership accountable at the military, political, and top level of leadership. If we do not defend ourselves, if we do not disrupt these Russian operations, and we do not hold the Russian leadership accountable, it will continue and they may continue to escalate.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Dr. Wallander follows:]

[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Dr. Wallander.
We will next go to General Nicholson. General.

STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON (RETIRED), FORMER
COMMANDER OF U.S. FORCES--AFGHANISTAN AND NATO'S RESOLUTE
SUPPORT MISSION

General Nicholson. Thank you, Chairman, and thank you, Ranking Member, for the honor to appear before this committee. And it is also a pleasure to be alongside such distinguished colleagues. I will summarize some of the major points from my written submission.

History tells us that miscalculations and mistakes are what leads to war. And, of course, they are especially dangerous with respect to the United States and Russia because of our substantial nuclear arsenals. And if, indeed, they did this, this will be a serious miscalculation and a serious mistake.

As we know, there were periods of shared interest and some cooperation in Afghanistan. Up through 2012, logistical cooperation through the Northern Distribution Network was a positive aspect of our relationship with Russia. But, after 2014, that changed with the annexation of Crimea, the invasion of Ukraine, the threats to the eastern States of the NATO alliance. Within NATO where I was the Allied Land Commander at the time, we began drawing up defensive plans for the first time in the 25 years since the end of the cold war. When I moved from Turkey to Afghanistan in 2016, by that time, the Russians had intervened in Syria and, of course, we saw a major focus by the United States on ISIS and Syria.

But, at that time also, we saw a modest increase in capabilities by the Russians in Central Asia. And, of course, we discussed this up our chain of command and through intelligence and military channels. Myself, General Votel, General Scaparrotti, Secretary Mattis, all addressed this publicly. And let me go a little bit into that because it ties into what the other witnesses are referring to.

What we saw was a pattern that they had used in Crimea.

Ukraine, the Baltics, and Syria of using military exercises as a way to move capabilities and people into an area and, then, leave some behind. This would desensitize us to their presence. It would generate options for them. And obviously, it would reduce our warning times, should they choose to use these capabilities. This slow, gradual buildup, while we were focused primarily on Syria, was of concern enough to me as commander that we highlighted this and, eventually, called them out.

At this same time, they were arming and equipping and giving money to the Taliban. Now it was in modest quantities. It was not designed to be a game changer on the battlefield. For example, the Taliban wanted surface-to-air missiles; the Russians did not give them to them. So, I always concluded that their support to the Taliban was calibrated in some sense. But just because it was calibrated does not mean that it was not important and it did not cause us difficulties. In the northern part of Afghanistan, in particular, in Kunduz, this Russian assistance did help the Taliban to inflict higher casualties on the Afghan Security Forces and more hardship on the Afghan people.

Despite all of this, I was somewhat surprised to read the reports of Russian involvement in bounties because this is so risky and irresponsible that it would mark a departure from this previously calibrated approach. And, of course, the layers of complexity inside the Russian decisionmaking process and inside Afghanistan are baffling even to those who know these areas deeply. But, if this is validated, regardless of who made this decision and whether it was made in Moscow or made in the field, regardless of whether Russian leaders were complicit directly or they were merely incompetent in their failure to control operations, they are still responsible. It is also important to note that there were two sides of this transaction: the Russians offered and the Taliban accepted. And this is in direct contradiction to the spirit and the letter of the Afghan peace agreement.

So, if we assess that Russia put bounties on Americans and coalition members, then what should we do about it?

No. 1, we need to condemn this action from the highest levels of the U.S. Government and NATO, so that the Russians understand it is unacceptable.

Two, with respect to Russia, we should suspend any troop withdrawals from Germany. These troop withdrawals play into Russian desires to undermine and weaken NATO. If carried out despite these bounties, this will be viewed as a sign of American weakness in the face of Russian threats.

Three, with respect to the Taliban, we should hold on our troop drawdown in Afghanistan at the present level until the Taliban have met the conditions that they agreed to in the peace agreement. We have delivered on our part by drawing down to 8600 ahead of schedule. The Taliban needs to deliver on theirs. And this includes severing ties with Al Qaeda, reentering Afghan peace negotiations, and a sustained reduction in violence.

Our long war in Afghanistan is only going to end at the peace table, and as leaders, we all have a moral responsibility to do everything in our power to protect our service members who are fighting for an enduring peace in Afghanistan and to deliver on the sacrifice of the Americans, the coalition members, and the Afghans who came before them.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of General Nicholson follows:]

[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

Mr. Castro. Thank you, General.
Mr. Brzezinski.
I think you may be on mute. There you go.

STATEMENT OF IAN BRZEZINSKI, FORMER DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY
OF DEFENSE FOR EUROPE AND NATO, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Mr. Brzezinski. Mr. Chairman, can you hear me now?
Mr. Castro. Yes.
Mr. Brzezinski. Thank you.

Chairman Castro, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished members of the committee, Americans are rightly outraged by reports of Russia placing bounties on U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan. These reports, as heinous as they are, underscore a broader challenge confronting the West: Russia's pattern of escalating aggressive international conduct.

Over the last decade and a half, Moscow has applied the full suite of Russian power to dominate its neighbors, create division in the West, and position Russia as a global power. The suite of tools has included military and paramilitary forces, economic and energy embargoes, assassination and political subterfuge, information and cyber warfare, separatist groups, and frozen conflicts. That campaign history includes a 2007 cyber attack on Estonia, the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the 2016 coup attempt in Montenegro, assassinations in the United Kingdom, Germany, just last week in Austria, and elsewhere.

As the committee has documented, Russia has meddled not only in the elections of our allies, but even in our own elections. This willingness to directly attack the United States took a kinetic dimension in Syria in 2018. There, Russian paramilitary units attacked outposts known to be manned by U.S. Special Operations Forces. In light of all this, recent reports of Russia's bounties on American soldiers are disturbingly consistent with what has been a steady escalation of Russian international interference and aggression.

Now, over the past decade and a half of this, the West's response, including that of the United States, to Russia's assertiveness has consisted of limited incremental escalations of economic sanctions and military deployments, complemented by half-hearted and short-lived diplomatic isolation. This incrementalism conveys hesitancy and a lack of unity and determination on behalf of the United States and the Western alliance. It has failed to convince Putin to reverse course and it may have actually emboldened him. Continued incrementalism not only promises continued confrontation with Russia, it increases the risk of conflict, both intentional and unintentional.

U.S. strategy regarding Putin's Russia needs to be calibrated to this reality. Properly calibrated engagement entails exploring avenues through which to modulate tension and foster collaboration. But it also requires more immediate and stronger measures to deter and counter Russian aggression and provocation. Toward those ends, U.S. strategy should include the following priorities:

First, we need to increase NATO's readiness for high-intensity conflict. Russia's military modernization efforts and its concentration of forces on its western frontier have increased the risk of conflict in Europe. This reality, of course, underscores the need for our NATO allies to continue increasing their military capability and readiness. But there is more the U.S. can and should do. We should transition the U.S. Armored Brigade Combat Team in Poland and related elements to a permanent presence. The U.S. should also permanently station in the Baltics a Special Forces contingent. President

Trump should reconsider his decision to withdraw U.S. forces in Germany. Removing forces from Europe weakens our deterrent posture in Europe at a time when the threat from Russia is increasing. It signals a lack of commitment to European security that President Putin will surely relish.

Second, we need to more robustly support the transatlantic aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine. NATO enlargement expanded the zone of peace and security in Europe and strengthened the alliance's military capability. Both Ukraine and Georgia should be provided a clear path to NATO membership. Perpetuating their position in a zone of geopolitical ambiguity only animates Putin's appetite and sense of opportunity to reassert dominion over these two democracies.

Third, we need to more effectively counter Russia's dissemination of false information. In this realm, the United States essentially disarmed itself when it closed the doors in 1999 of the United States Information Agency. This multibillion agency was our frontline force on the information front. Congress should reestablish or establish a modernized version of USIA, so that the United States can return to the offense in this dynamic and fast-paced dimension of international affairs.

Fourth, we should increase economic sanctions on Russia. Today's sanctions may impair the Russian economy, but if their intended outcome has been to deter Russian aggression, they have failed by that measure. Sanctions should be escalated from measures primarily aimed against specific Russian individuals and firms to more comprehensive sectoral sanctions against Russian financial and energy sectors.

Finally, we need to strengthen Western cohesion and unity. These aforementioned actions will only be fully effective if they are complemented by unity and purpose in action within the transatlantic community.

So, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member McCaul, as you and the committee address the intelligence regarding Russian bounties, I urge you to also assess the effectiveness of U.S. policy in terms of deterring, countering, and containing the full spectrum of Moscow's malign ambitions and actions. When it comes to Russia, time is long overdue for an unequivocal U.S. policy.

Thank you, sir.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Brzezinski follows:]

[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Mr. Brzezinski, and thank you to all the witnesses for your testimonies.

I will now recognize members for 5 minutes each. And pursuant to House rules, all time yielded is for the purposes of questioning our witnesses. Because of the virtual format of this hearing, I will recognize members by committee seniority, alternating between Democrats and Republicans. If you miss your turn, please let our staff know and we will come back to you. If you seek recognition, you must unmute your microphone and address the chair verbally. And as we start questioning, I will start by recognizing myself.

I want to ask a question of Mr. Morell first. In instances where the Russians paid to have American service members killed, and it appears from press accounts, at least some press accounts, that the Russian plot results in American deaths, in your experience as somebody who carried out the Presidential Daily Briefing, is this something that intelligent briefers would make the President aware of?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir, without a doubt.

Mr. Castro. Is there anyone on the panel, based on your own expertise, who believes that the President would not have been

made aware of this information? Anyone?

[No response.]

No one? Thank you.

In the event that the President's advisors really withheld such alarming intelligence from him, even as he made continuous concessions to Russia, who would ultimately be responsible for such process failures, mid-level career civil servants or administration leadership? And I ask that of anyone on the panel. If, for example, the intelligence was somehow not provided to him, then where does the failure lie?

Mr. Morell. Congressman, maybe I can jump in here, having been in the Oval Office every morning with President Bush for a year and, then, many times with President Obama. If the President's briefer did not raise something of such importance, then I believe it falls on whoever else is there from the intelligence community, the DNI or the Director of CIA. And barring their failure to raise such information, I think it falls on the responsibility of the National Security Advisor to make absolutely certain the President knows.

Mr. Castro. Okay.

Dr. Wallander. Could I add to Mike's point?

Mr. Castro. Sure.

Dr. Wallander. Which is that every morning in the Obama White House, among the duties of the senior directors was to read the PDBs in advance of the presentation of the PDB to the President by the briefers, and to provide for the National Security Advisor--in our case, Susan Rice--advice and context, because she would go in and be part of that briefing and be ready to make sure that, as Mike pointed out, the briefing had been received and correctly understood by the White House leadership.

Mr. Castro. Okay. And we have about 2 minutes left on my questioning.

Some of you in your remarks, your testimony, suggested different courses of action, different responses that the United States could take. I want to ask you this question: so far, as I mentioned in my remarks, there has been not even a public condemnation by the President or the White House against Russia for these reported actions. Let me ask you this--and we only have about a minute and 45 seconds--what is the cost of the United States not even saying a word to Russia about these reported actions?

Mr. Morell. Congressman, let me jump in here again. I did not make any recommendations about what steps the U.S. should take, but I think it is really important that we all recognize something about Vladimir Putin's personality. He is a risk-taker. And when he takes a risk and he succeeds in his mind, he is often willing to take even larger risks in the future. So, the failure for him to face any cost here I think significantly increases the chances of him doing something else to undermine the United States, possibly even larger than what we have seen in this case.

Mr. Brzezinski. Mr. Chairman?

Mr. Castro. Yes, Mr. Brzezinski?

Mr. Brzezinski. Allow me to complement Director Morell's point. When we do push back on Putin and push back firmly, he does respond. He is ultimately a pragmatist. And as Dr. Wallander pointed out, he picks his battles carefully.

When looking back to Russia's invasion on Georgia in 2008, the turning point of that conflict occurred when the United States demonstrated some military muscle. The United States flew back Georgian soldiers to their capital, Tbilisi via a military cargo plane right in the middle of that conflict, demonstrating, readiness to take sacrifices, basically Putin with the risk of a direct military confrontation with the

United States. And that was basically the turning point of that invasion. That action convinced Putin to end that invasion.

So, if we are more forceful, if we are more firm, we do have very good prospects of actually restraining Putin's actions and ambitions.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Mr. Brzezinski.

And I am going to keep myself on time on the questioning. So, I will go over to Ranking Member Mike McCaul.

Mr. McCaul. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Let me just, without commenting on the specifics of the intelligence, there was a very strong dissent. The briefer was a career intelligence officer that made this decision not to brief. And I guess the question is whether it is actionable intelligence.

Having said that, I think the nature of this intelligence being targeted at U.S. troops would be a significant departure for Russia in its dealings with the Taliban. Now I personally think that the President deserved to at least know about this. I think, if true--and I know that the intelligence community is going back and doing a deep dive--I do think Russia should be condemned and the GRU should be sanctioned, as we have authorized by Congress.

My first question is to General Nicholson. You have been in Afghanistan for quite some time. And let me say, all the panelists are very, very impressive with your testimony. I think this calls into question the good faith of the Taliban. I do think, though, since the peace plan has been entered into, there have been no Americans targeted, although they are targeting Afghan nationals.

Can you tell me, No. 1, how significant of a departure this would be? Because we know they are arming and giving cash to the Taliban to kill ISIS, but this would be a different policy change to target American troops. And second, does it call into question the good-faith negotiating of the Taliban?

General Nicholson. Thank you, Ranking Member McCaul.

I do think it calls into question the good faith of the Taliban. There are two parts to this transaction, again, if validated. But we do know that the Russians have provided small arms, ammunition, money to the Taliban, and have been doing it for some time. And frankly, the ability to direct that and control it, and where it is used and where it is not used, is extremely limited. Once it is turned over to them, they will use it as they see fit.

And I have no doubt that some of that was used in the northern part of Afghanistan against Afghan units with American advisors, especially in the Kunduz area. And so, I think that, in this sense, now specifically offering bounties is a small step from what they were already doing. Their justification for this action was the fight against ISIS, but part of this was, as the other witnesses have mentioned, a false narrative and misinformation on the part of Russia that the United States was supporting ISIS.

So, I think that this does call into question the Taliban's commitment to the agreement. As I mentioned in my statement, they need to sever ties with Al Qaeda; there should be a sustained reduction in violence, and they need to begin the peace talks that they are committed to do on----

Mr. McCaul. If I could reclaim my limited time, I note that Ambassador Rahmani, Afghanistan, our Special Envoy, they are having discussions this week about a humanitarian cease-fire. My concern is all the good work that you have done over there, if the Taliban overruns Afghanistan and takes over, then we have a safe haven for many years to come.

How do you view the peace plan moving forward? I always believe, whether it is Syria or Iraq, we need a residual force.

if anything, to protect the homeland. What are your thoughts on force reduction?

General Nicholson. I think that this level of 8600, we should hold there until the Taliban delivers on their portion of the peace agreement and we move to the next stage. So, I do think that is important. I do think there is a threat from the region in terms of the multitude of terrorist groups that are over there. We have over 20 designated groups, U.S.-designated groups, in the region. And I think that, with the government in Afghanistan, we should consider, if they ask us to stay and request our help to keep pressure on these groups, it is definitely something we should consider.

Mr. McCaul. I can tell you from the Ambassador they do.

Let me ask real quickly, Secretary Brzezinski, the President's decision in Germany, I sent a letter with Adam Kinzinger saying this sends a bad message to NATO forces, to Putin, CENTCOM, AFRICOM. However, if they move some of these forces as they talked about, the National Security Advisor, to Poland and the Baltic nations, describe to me how that would work, and would that be an even better strategy?

Mr. Brzezinski. It would be better than pulling the forces back from Germany to the United States. But I do not think we ought to be punishing Germany to the benefit of Poland. We need a robust presence in Poland and we have one now, which I think is an appropriate level. I would make it more permanent. But that is a frontline presence. You want your rearguard, your rear echelons, to also be robust. We need a robust presence in Germany, so not only we can reinforce the Baltics, we can also reinforce southern Europe. And then, of course, we need a robust presence in Germany if we want to have a robust military relationship with the Germans and other militaries of the NATO alliance.

So, this decision by the President is undercutting not only our relationship with Germany, it is undercutting our operational efficiency to reinforce our frontline forces in Poland and frontline operations in the Baltics. So, this is a potential, if it gets executed, a real setback, a weakening of our deterrent posture in Europe.

Mr. McCaul. I have talked to the Ambassadors in the Baltic States and Poland, and they would, obviously, very much welcome our presence there.

And I know, Mr. Chairman, my time has expired. You have been very generous.

I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Ranking Member McCaul.

We will go to Congressman Brad Sherman.

Mr. Sherman. Thank you.

I want to thank our witnesses for coming before us, but the loudest testimony is being given by the witness who did not show up. Secretary Pompeo has invited and strongly urged to come before us, and his refusal to do so shouts loudly that the process for decisionmaking on foreign policy and the outcome of the decisionmaking in this White House is indefensible.

We have a situation where Russia attacks Georgia, the Ukraine, interferes in Syria, interferes in elections in the United States, interferes in Montenegro, occupies eastern Ukraine and the Crimea, and according to Secretary Pompeo, when he speaks, but, of course, not to our committee, has been arming the Taliban for years. So, we have all those facts; plus, good reason to believe that they are providing bounty on our soldiers. And the response from the White House is, let's invite them to the G-8.

There has been another response, recently a Department of Treasury decision, basically--and I will get to this later--that they should have prevented Americans from buying Russian

sovereign debt, and they went as light on that as they possibly could under the law.

General Nicholson, in March 2018, you said that you have had weapons brought into your headquarters that you know were given to the Taliban by the Russians. As recently as last week, Russia claims it only supplies weapons to, quote, ``legitimate government of Afghanistan.'' For how long, and in what quantity, or what estimated quantity, have the Russians provided weapons to the Taliban?

General Nicholson. Thank you for the question, sir.

We believe there was a modest amount of support. It was designed to gain influence with the Taliban. And to be fair, our intentions were uncertain at that point. When would the U.S. withdraw? When would NATO withdraw? What would be left behind? There would be instability in the region. So, we saw this as an attempt by the Russians to gain influence with the Taliban as part of potentially a post-withdrawal scenario.

However, that should not be misconstrued. These weapons made a difference on the battlefield. They weren't game-changing in a sense, but they did make a difference and they did help inflict higher casualties, and against units that had U.S. advisors.

Mr. Sherman. So, we know that Americans have died as a result of Russia providing those weapons. They have just now, apparently, added the additional obscenity of not just giving the weapons to people who want to kill us, but giving them extra money if they actually do.

I would like to focus on Russian sovereign debt and other targeted sanctions. Under existing statute, the Secretary of the Treasury was supposed to choose from a menu of sanctions for other Russian wrongdoing dealing with their sovereign debt. If we completely shut off American involvement in their sovereign debt, we could probably drive up their borrowing cost by half a percentage point. But the Secretary of the Treasury, in the midst of all this, decided to say, well, it is fine for Americans to buy this debt in the secondary market and to buy the debt directly from State-owned enterprises.

Would a ban on any American involvement in Russian sovereign debt be the kind of pain that Putin would feel, and what other economic sanctions do you think are appropriate? I will ask whichever witness wants to respond.

Dr. Wallander. I can take that one, sir. One of the most important targets to impose costs on political decisionmakers in Russia is, indeed, the financial sector in general, and sovereign debt is certainly part of the menu where you could increase those costs.

I think that, as an instrument of overall U.S. policy, or U.S. policy up to this instance, that is constructive and smart. I would say, in this instance, though, I would target sanctions in two areas. One, more on the security services, on defense sales, on the kinds of money that Russia makes from sales of defense capabilities abroad, and on financing that supports many of these asymmetric operations; that would target it more directly on those who are responsible for these decisions.

Mr. Sherman. If I could interrupt you, obviously, we would like to prevent Russia from selling weapons to India, Turkey, and others, but that is not something we have the sovereign right to do. And as long as the Russian government can borrow money, the fact that particular military complexes cannot borrow the money is fairly irrelevant, in that the money is fungible. Once you lend it to the Russian sovereign, they can certainly lend it or invest it in military operations.

I will point out that we had an amendment in last year's NDAA, which I wrote, to prohibit U.S. purchase of sovereign

debt of Russia and its enterprises until they could go a full election cycle without interfering in our elections. That passed the House, but, of course, was stripped out by the Senate. I am hoping that Senators realize that now is the time to impose some real sanctions on Russia for all of its behaviors, and beginning with this bounty.

And I yield back.

Mr. Castro. Thank you.

All right. Mr. Chabot of Ohio.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

First of all, there ought to be no question in anybody's mind that Russia and Putin, in particular, are no friend of the United States, and anybody who thinks otherwise is on the wrong path and does not know what they are thinking about or talking about, or anything else. They are not our friend.

General Nicholson, let me go to you with the first question. The reason we went to Afghanistan in the first place was to root out terrorists there and to ensure that they could never use that country to stage attacks against the United States again. Could you give us your current assessment of the strength of the Taliban-Al Qaeda ties, the relationship currently? And then, is there any reason to believe that the Taliban would ever, or will ever, live up to any commitments that they might make?

General Nicholson. Thank you for the question, sir.

And I have to caveat this by saying I do not have access to the classified intelligence that I did when I was commander in the time since I have left. However, you have hit the nail on the head. This is why we went there, the idea that it would never be used as a launching pad for attacks against the U.S. That has not happened. So, we have been successful in that sense.

But I am concerned that they have not renounced their ties to Al Qaeda. This is one of the conditions in the agreement. And not only a public renunciation, but a real severing of ties with Al Qaeda. And this was the original reason that brought us there, and, of course, this condition has to be met to have an enduring peace that secures our interests.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you very much.

Mr. Brzezinski, I will go to you next, if I can. What does Russia hope to achieve in Afghanistan, especially with respect to us? It would seem that, if they want us to leave, that they should be working to stabilize the country and decrease, not increase, U.S. deaths. Could you talk about Russia's goals, their security interests in Afghanistan currently?

Mr. Brzezinski. Thank you, sir. Can you hear me?

Mr. Chabot. Yes, I can hear you fine.

Mr. Brzezinski. Great.

I think Russian objectives in Afghanistan are the following:

One, there is a bit of a revenge component because, particularly when it comes to the team led by President Putin in Moscow, they are bitter over the Soviet loss in that country that they see was catalyzed by U.S. support to the mujahideen at that time.

Second, I think they want to impose pain to help tie us down, to impose cost, to psychologically break our mental fortitude as an international actor.

And then, three, ultimately, they would like to see us leave, and leave in a way that enables them to develop a relationship with whatever regime or government that would succeed in Afghanistan, so they can establish a relationship to further their influence in that region.

So, three things: revenge, imposing pain; and tying us down, and, ultimately, getting us out, so that they can enhance

their influence over the region.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you.

Mr. Brzezinski, I will stick with you, if I can. It seems like we have been playing defense vis-a-vis the Russians, and the Chinese, for that matter, relative to disinformation and propaganda for way too long, for some time. What would you suggest in terms of a more proactive U.S. policy in this area? And, of course, we are not interested in propaganda. We are interested in getting the truth out there. But how can the U.S. do a better job vis-a-vis both Russia and the Chinese in that sphere?

Mr. Brzezinski. Information operations have been long a part of U.S. policy. It was our effective management of information operations and engagement, so to speak, public diplomacy, in the cold war that was probably one of the keys to our success. We won economically, we won militarily, but we also won in the information engagement sphere, the public diplomacy sphere.

The cornerstone, the driver of that dimension of our strategy was the United States Information Agency, an agency that we shut down in 1999, at the time when it had, roughly, a \$2 to \$3 billion budget. And at the high point, the USIA I think had over 10,000 people working to get the U.S. perspective out, working to deepen ties, working to support dissidents around the world.

When we shut down the USIA in 1999, we basically disarmed ourselves in the information space and have never really kind of been able to recover from that. So, that is why I believe we ought to reanimate this institution, give it Cabinet-level rank, bring back its bureaucracy, to use that terrible word, and enable us to get back into the game of information operations on the offensive. That is going to be critical because right now we have handicapped ourselves.

Mr. Chabot. Thank you. My time has expired, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Mr. Chabot.

Gregory Meeks of New York.

Mr. Meeks. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Former Secretary of State George Schultz, I am told, would ask outgoing Ambassadors, he would take them to the side and point to the map and ask them, ``Where is your country?'' And naturally, these outgoing Ambassadors would point to their new host countries. And here, Secretary Schultz would correct them and tell them their country is the United States of America.

So, I am often confounded by the President's actions that directly undermine the interest and security of the American people. This latest intelligence revelation is an alarming pattern by this President. The fact that the Secretary of State Pompeo is not testifying today is yet another alarming pattern of this administration. Congress has an oversight responsibility and duty, and the Secretary of State should be here to answer our questions. And I am glad that our esteemed witnesses are here today.

But it is unfathomable to me that the Russian government continues to be unchecked as it engages in a systemic and aggressive policy to undermine, dismantle, and disrupt American alliances, threaten our democracy, and allegedly go after our troops. Time and time again, this committee asks, where is the President's loyalty and why does he fail to act? It is outrageous to me that we ask our service men and women to put their lives in danger for our peace and security, and yet, the administration won't believe a credible piece of intelligence putting bounties on their heads.

How was Congress never briefed until the claim was relayed to the press, at great risk to whistleblowers? This failure to act, this unwillingness to brief this committee and others,

reflects a continued antagonism and disdain for this body as a coequal branch of government.

The Russian government continues to operate adversarially, and the President continues to show deference to Putin. By the administration's actions and inactions, it is unclear to me how President Trump would answer Secretary Schultz' question today, ``Where is your country?''

Let me ask, and I think that I want to ask General Nicholson, Mr. Morell referenced that warfighters often also have access to raw intelligence. Can you describe in your experience how you and warfighters at the tactical level would have handled and acted upon raw intelligence that suggested Russia had put bounties on American troops?

General Nicholson. Thank you, sir.

Yes, we do have access to that intelligence, and there is a vigorous dialog that goes on at all levels, between commanders, intel officers at different agencies. Multiple times, if I had a question, I would call back to Washington, talk to the heads of the various agencies, and we would compare our perceptions and fill in the blanks. And so, this dialog, very active, is extremely important, and it helped inform me as a commander in the field, so that I could make the best decisions to accomplish the mission and protect my troops.

For example, if there were a threat out there that was identified, even if it was raw intelligence, then you would see commanders in the field, warfighters, take immediate steps to protect their service members, regardless of kind of the validation. Typically, the default would be to act on that intelligence, especially with protective measures. Now, before you might go offensively, you would want more precise, actionable intelligence.

The other thing we would do is immediately elevate it and let people know. So, in the case of the Russian army and funding that went to the Taliban in 2018, one of the ways that we acted on this was to go public. And I did an interview with the British Broadcasting Company in which we talked about what the Russians were doing, the fact that Governors of northern provinces had brought me weapons and said, ``These came from Russia,' ' were given by the Russians to the Taliban.

Getting it into the public domain elicits a response. It may just be a denial, but you have got it on the radar screen. They know they are being watched and they know you are pushing back. And so, these kinds of actions are extremely important.

Now, of course, the higher up you go, the more powerful the response is. And so, this is why in my opening comments I said pushing back on this kind of behavior at the highest levels is extremely important.

And so, thank you for holding this hearing, because this is one of the ways we make the Russians aware that we are watching.

Mr. Meeks. I couldn't agree with you more. I see I have only got a few seconds. I wish at the highest level our President of the United States would push back on this Russian aggression, and particularly in regards to the bounties that may have been put on the heads of our men and women in the service.

And I see I am out of time. So, I yield back, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Mr. Meeks.

We will go to Mr. Perry of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Perry. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for the witnesses.

I will start out with Mr. Morell. Mr. Morell, have you seen the intelligence regarding the bounty story?

Mr. Morell. No, sir.

Mr. Perry. Okay. How about Mr. Nicholson? Have you seen the

intelligence?

General Nicholson. No, sir, I have not.

Mr. Perry. Okay. Thank you.

How about Dr. Wallander? Have you seen the intelligence regarding the statements?

Dr. Wallander. No, sir, I have not.

Mr. Perry. Dr. Wallander, in particular, as I read here from your notes, you have assumed that the published stories are true, is that--I do not want to put words in your mouth, but that is what my notes show me. Is that correct or incorrect?

Dr. Wallander. I said that, for the purposes of this hearing, to be able to address and explain what Russia is up to in general, that I would assume that they were true. I would not address the falsity or truths of the public reports.

Mr. Perry. I mean, I understand for the purposes of the hearing, but you understand there is a bigger story here, and just making the presumption or assumption that they are true (a) not having seen any of the intelligence personally, and (b) understanding that the GRU is, as I am sure you all know, is daily engaged in misinformation; and finally, as you probably know, this is based on very specious reports of human intelligence by individuals that have a motive to provide misinformation to the United States. I just think that that is breathtakingly irresponsible.

But, that having been said, do you think it is appropriate, based on this conjecture, based on just reports from The New York Times that are based on yet even more specious human intelligence by people that aren't very friendly to the United States of America, that this President take action against a strategic adversary? Do any of you think that that would be appropriate?

Dr. Wallander. Thank you, sir, for your question. To answer it, I would say that, if this were reported in a PDB, that it is certainly appropriate for the leadership of the U.S. Government to decide on a messaging strategy, which is short of what you asked about a broader action strategy. Certainly, a messaging strategy. I would personally start with the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff speaking to their counterparts. Because if the reports are true, the GRU reports to the Russian Minister of Defense. So, I hope that addresses your question. I think that would be the first step. You are absolutely right, actual action would not be warranted based on this sort of report.

Mr. Perry. Right. I mean, where does, in your mind--and, ladies and gentlemen, the three that I have asked the questions of--where does verification of the intelligence lie in relation to the timeline of when you either take actions or make statements? Where does verification of intelligence lie? Is it as soon as you hear the report, the rumor, the supposition, the claim? Is action required then? Or does verification fall anywhere inside, in between, the time you hear it and the time you take action or make statements?

Mr. Morell. Congressman, maybe I can answer that question. I think that an administration is required to take action--whatever that action is is obviously part of the policy process--but is required to take action when the intelligence community judges with medium to high confidence that something has happened. And that is why, for me, knowing what that level of confidence is on this judgment is so very important. Because I think if it is low----

Mr. Perry. Are you saying, Mr. Morell, are you saying that you have information that you can verify or justify that we had medium to high confidence that this is true, this story is true?

Mr. Morell. No, sir. No, sir. The point I am trying to make is, I do not know what the level of confidence was. But if it was low, then I would be perfectly comfortable with senior policymakers going back to the intelligence community and saying, ``We need more information. We need to take a harder look at this. You have got to collect more and figure out whether this is right or not.''

Mr. Perry. Well, I would agree with you. I would agree with you, Mr. Morell. And before the President or anyone takes actions, I think it is important to verify that. I am just going to quote the chairman of the committee on the death of Soleimani where he said, ``The decision to kill Soleimani escalated tensions with Iran and risked plunging us into war.''

And I remind everybody on the panel that Soleimani is a target that we had complete and verified intelligence on for many, many years of the deaths of thousands of American service members and maiming of thousands of others of my friends who served in uniform. And the criticism was robust for the President regarding that decision where there was verified, actionable intelligence over a long period of time, and there is none----

Mr. Castro. The gentleman's time is up.

Mr. Perry [continuing]. There is none with this.

And with that, I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Morell. Mr. Chairman, may I just add one point?

Mr. Castro. Sure, please.

Mr. Morell. So, I do not want to leave anyone with the impression that I know that the confidence level was low or the confidence level was medium or the confidence level was high. So, I think that is just very important. If it was medium to high, then I think that required action on the part of the President.

Mr. Castro. Thank you.

We will now go to Albio Sires of New Jersey. I think you are on mute there. There you go.

Mr. Sires. Yes, I do not have any questions at this moment. I am just listening. Thank you.

Mr. Castro. Okay. We will go to Mr. Kinzinger of Illinois.

Mr. Kinzinger. All right. Thank you. Let me get on the video here. There we go.

First off, thank you all for being here. I very much appreciate it, all your good work, everything you are doing for the country. This is a really important issue.

I need to say a couple of things upfront. First off, I think it is too much to call this a hoax. Second, though, I think it is too much to say that we absolutely know this happened, and therefore, here should be the penalties. I have read every piece of intelligence, at least offered to me, and in terms of what level of confidence, that is not my expertise; that is up to the intelligence agencies.

And I think the question of whether the President should or shouldn't be briefed, it is really, in my mind, an art and not a science. It is a matter, when do you feel, whether it is the brief or the intelligence experts, that you should brief a President on this? If it is not actionable, is it worth going to him? Well, if I was President, I would want to know, but not every President would or should.

So, I think a lot of the so-called scandal that we have been seeing here is not a scandal at all. I think it is just an art form. And unfortunately, look, this goes to--the prior questioner, Mr. Perry, mentioned about Soleimani. That was a confirmed bad guy that took confirmed action that killed Americans. I operated against him in Iraq, or against his people at least. And there was opposition to that.

And I think with something like this it comes down to

political stripes, unfortunately. If you are a Republican, you are going to say this was nothing. If you are a Democrat, you are going to say this is everything. And I just want to get to the bottom of this, because when we jump to conclusions, I do not think we are doing any good for our folks in the field.

But it seems to me that the only thing that Putin responds to is strength. Whenever Putin attempts a new maneuver, he waits to see the international community's response, and particularly the United States. And when nothing happens, he escalates. We have seen it time and again. We have seen it, for instance, in Syria multiple times and everywhere else.

As I have said before, if the intelligence proved that the Russian officials approved of this bounty scheme, the United States and our international partners would need to respond forcefully. But had the administration responded back in February when the intelligence was even less certain, I fully believe my colleagues on the other side of the aisle would be holding a hearing bashing the administration on this.

Mr. Morell, let me just ask you, during your time as CIA Director, would you have recommended--you touched on it--but would you have recommended retaliatory actions against Russia with anything other than high probability? You talked using maybe medium probability. But, when you are discussing the fact that this is Russia, would you on a medium or anything short of high probability?

Mr. Morell. Yes, I would--so high probability, high confidence to an intelligence analyst is not certainty that something has happened, but you are getting pretty close. Medium to high confidence is pretty good as well.

So, CIA Directors do not make recommendations to Presidents about what they should do. They characterize the intelligence and our confidence in it. So, if it was medium to high, I would tell the President that there is a very good chance that this happened and it is up to you on how you want to respond.

Mr. Kinzinger. Yes, I think this is the key to this. We know that Russia has been meddling in Afghanistan. That is not a question. And I actually would have advocated for action, whatever that looks like, back in 2013 or 2014. It is a bipartisan issue, right? I mean it really is. The issue we are discussing is, was there particularly a bounty, not is Russia involved, not is Russia doing things that could kill Americans, because they have been. And I have been advocating to push back against that for a long time.

Mr. Brzezinski, let me ask you, what other States are supportive of the Taliban and have any of them placed bounties on the U.S. or coalition soldiers?

Mr. Brzezinski. Sir, let me just add one point on the bounty issue. The fact that it is plausible that these bounties were placed on American soldiers in Afghanistan by Russia is testimony in itself that our policy toward Russia is inadequate in terms of deterring aggression. And so, I want to make that important point. The fact that we are even saying this----

Mr. Kinzinger. Fully agree.

Mr. Brzezinski [continuing]. Underscores the point that we need to recalibrate our posture toward Russia across the whole spectrum.

Mr. Kinzinger. Let me just say I fully agree with you 100 percent and I would echo those comments. But, then, specifically, are there any other States that are doing things like this that we know about?

Mr. Brzezinski. I do not have statistics on that, sir.

Mr. Kinzinger. Okay. So, you do not know if Iran or anything is involved in the same kind of situation? Okay.

Let me ask just another question of General Nicholson. During your time commanding U.S. ----

Mr. Castro. Your time has expired.

Mr. Kinzinger. I'm sorry?

Mr. Castro. Your time has expired. Do you have a quick question?

Mr. Kinzinger. Oh, I'm sorry, I did not see a clock up there. I will yield back. Thank you.

Mr. Castro. Okay. Thank you.

We will go to Mr. Connolly of Virginia.

Mr. Connolly. Thank you. Can you hear me, Mr. Chairman?

Mr. Castro. Yes, I can hear you.

Mr. Connolly. Thank you.

And thank you to the panel.

Mr. Morell, on June 30th, the National Security Advisor, Mr. O'Brien, and the White House Press Secretary, Ms. McEnany, said the President had not been briefed on this intelligence due to disagreements among the intelligence community. Is that how intelligence shifts up to the President, that it has got to be in agreement or he does not hear about it?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir, there are often pieces in the President's Daily Brief where one or two or three agencies believe something and another agency has questions about it. And those dissents are expressed in the piece. The reason for the dissents are expressed in the piece, and the reason why those dissents are important to the President are often expressed in the piece. So, they do not need a unanimous view to move forward.

Mr. Connolly. So, the explanation they gave does not really pass any kind of real test, based on your own experience?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir.

Mr. Connolly. That is not how it works?

Mr. Morell. That is not how it works, sir.

Mr. Connolly. Right. So, there is reason to question the credibility coming out of the White House as to whether the President, in fact, got briefed. We know that the President does not like to read things, but that does not mean that it was not available to him. And it is not clear, from my understanding, that he was not briefed. Certainly, the rationale given for why he was not briefed, as you just pointed out, Mr. Morell, does not have credibility. It is just not how the process works.

But I would just say, even from a common-sense point of view, if I were an intelligence person and I saw any kind of intelligence that seemed halfway credible that the Russians had ramped up what they were doing in Afghanistan and were now paying a bounty on American lives to kill them, I am sure as hell I would want to make sure the Commander in Chief knew about that. I would take the risk that he know about that, whether it was small, medium, or high credible, actionable intelligence.

Mr. Brzezinski, I really appreciate what you had to say about Russia. The word that comes to my mind, because Dr. Wallander just said we have to ask the question why would Russia do this, I think that is the pertinent question. And for me--and I want you to react--you said Putin is a risk-taker. I would also say he loves to push, probe, and expand boundaries. He is always checking what the boundaries are.

And when you have a President who says, ``I believe Putin over my own intelligence community about Russian interference in the 2016 election,' ' ``I am willing to pull out 8,000 troops from Germany because I am angry at Merkel for not coming to the G7 meeting,' ' ``In fact, I want to invite Putin to that G7 meeting,' ' and, of course, having withdrawn from critical arms control agreements, and the like, and now calling this intelligence a hoax, it seems to me that, if I were Putin, I would tally all that up and say, ``I can operate with impunity

with this administration. There are going to be very few consequences for pushing that envelope as far as I can push it.' Do you think that is a fair appraisal of where we are in the current relationship with Vladimir Putin's Russia?

Mr. Brzezinski. Sir, I am on track with you on this. I would just characterize Putin not so much as a risk-taker, but someone who has got very clear objectives, is willing to assertively pursue those objectives, but who is also a pragmatist. As Celeste pointed out, as Dr. Wallander pointed out, he picks his battles carefully. And as you pointed out, he will probe, and if he does not see pushback, he will push further. If he sees forcibly pushback, he will back off.

And that is what is a concern about this immediate issue at hand, which is the bounties issues. Now that it is out in the public domain, now that it is an issue that has gotten the attention it has, it is now incumbent upon the administration to clearly articulate to the Russians this is completely unacceptable.

Mr. Connolly. Yes, and I would----

Mr. Brzezinski. We need a forceful response, at least rhetorically. And as for more specific elements of a more aggressive or substantive response, that has to be determined based on the intelligence.

Mr. Connolly. And I would add to what you just said, Mr. Brzezinski, conversely, there are consequences for not doing what you just said. When Putin hears equivocation and, well, we did not know and it is not clear, and we did not have actionable intelligence such that we could react at all, I think that gives him a flashing green light to do more of it and to look at other areas where he can do damage to the United States. And I think that is a very dangerous situation our President and this administration have put themselves in.

With that, I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Castro. Thank you.

We will go to Mr. Zeldin of New York. We cannot hear your audio there, Mr. Zeldin. For some reason, I am not hearing you. Can we come back to you? Okay.

What I am going to do is go to the next Republican, and then, go to a Democrat. All right? So, Mr. Mast of Florida. Mr. Mast, are you there?

[No response.]

Okay. Will the administrator tell me who the next Republican is that we can call on?

Ms. Stiles. Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Mr. Castro. Mr. Fitzpatrick? Okay.

Mr. Fitzpatrick. Can you hear me?

Mr. Castro. Yes, Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Mr. Fitzpatrick. Okay. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member.

Thank you to the panelists.

And just to echo what my friend Adam Kinzinger had said, I hope that our focus can be on, No. 1, fixing the problem, getting our arms around this intelligence and fixing it. And we always can have time to go back and do an after-action report on what did or did not happen after the fact, after we fix the problem.

So, for the panelists, thank you for being here.

And I just wanted to get your updated sense. I served in Ukraine as an FBI agent. That was my last international assignment. And we were, obviously, very well aware of Mr. Putin's sinister motives when it comes to that region. We all knew that Mr. Putin has geographic dominance aspirations to reconstitute the USSR. Iran has religious dominance aspirations. China has economic dominance aspirations. And in many ways, they were operating--in some ways, I should say--in

collaboration with one another.

So, if the panelists could just shed light and maybe provide us with an update on your assessment or your sense for the collaboration going on between Vladimir Putin and Syria, Iran, China, North Korea, and any other actors in the region?

Dr. Wallander. I can speak to that, sir. Russia and Iran collaborate militarily in Syria and have for years. The Russian military is not a ground presence in Syria and it relies on, as I suggested earlier, quasi-private military mercenary groups and, also, coordination with other actors, including Iran, in Syria.

Russia strategically coordinates with China in areas where they have common interests in challenging American leadership, whether that is in the U.N. Security Council in trying to prevent U.N. Security Council resolutions, for example, condemning the Assad regime in Syria or many others. They share an interest in trying to revise the global liberal order in order to undermine American leadership.

So, you can find instances in which Russia cooperates with countries in areas that really affect in a negative way American leadership and American allies and our interests.

Mr. Fitzpatrick. Do any of the other panelists have anything to add to that?

[No response.]

Okay. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Castro. Thank you.

Mr. Deutch of Florida.

Mr. Deutch. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and to the ranking member. Thanks for holding this hearing.

And thanks to the extraordinary testimony of our witnesses.

Mr. Morell, I am going to ask you about the reports that there was information in the President's Daily Briefing that the Russians were putting a bounty on the heads of American troops. And we have heard lots of reasons why there was no reason the President should have been concerned about this, should have wanted to be concerned about this. But I just want to ask you, I want to take a step back and have you explain how the President's Daily Brief is assembled. Can you do that for us?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir. So, there is a meeting every morning with the briefers there who just briefed that morning and they provide their feedback on what happened. The most important part of that feedback, are there any additional questions that customers need answers to that would result in a piece the next day? And then, the various parts of the intelligence community propose pieces for the next day and the out days and decisions are made about what is going to be in the book the next day and what is going to be in the book the day after that.

Once those pieces are drafted and approved within the agency that writes them, they are coordinated across the intelligence community. And that is where you can get agreement. So, you can get all agencies agreeing or you can get dissents. You can get DIA and CIA think one thing and NSA thinks something else.

So, that is pretty much how the process works. I would add that within each agency the process for getting a piece approved to be even sent out for coordination is extraordinarily rigorous, because at the end of the day these views are not views of a Michael Morell; they are the views of the Central Intelligence Agency and the views of the United States intelligence community.

Mr. Deutch. How do you react, Mr. Morell, to some of my colleagues coming back now to assert that this information shouldn't have been in there? One of my colleagues said it was not verifiable. One of them said it was biased human

intelligence and that, as a result, it should have been clear back in February that this is nothing to be concerned about.

Mr. Morell. So, if it was in the PDB--and I do not know that it was--but if it was in the PDB, it means at least one agency--one important agency, right?--believed the information to be true at some level of confidence. So, that is the response, right, is that someone in the intelligence community believed that information to be true. And that is why it was in the PDB. It would not be there otherwise.

Mr. Deutch. And so, before we even get to the question of low, medium, or high, which we discussed earlier, let's talk about the kind of information that it is. If there were information in the PDB that said that there was a threat against one of our Ambassadors in Europe, and it did not come up in the Daily Brief, at the morning meeting with the President, what would happen then? Would someone raise it with the President?

Mr. Morell. So, sure. If it is not in the PDB, but the President needs to know it, then the briefer can raise it on their own, right? ``This is something else you need to know, Mr. President.' ' Or the DNI, who is sitting there as well, the Director of National Intelligence can raise it and say, ``Mr. President, there is something else you need to know.' ' Or the Director of CIA, or anybody else in the room.

I mean, one of the things that people forget here is that the President's briefer is the most junior person in the room. I was once that person. I was the most junior person in the room. Right? So, the National Security Advisor, the White House Chief of Staff, the Vice President, the Director of National Intelligence, Director of CIA are all in the room. Any one of them are capable of saying, ``Mr. President, in addition to what is in your book, you also need to know this,' ' or that.

Mr. Deutch. Who decides? Does the junior briefer decide what to report to the President?

Mr. Morell. So, in general, yes. In my case, I went in there every morning with the Director of Central Intelligence, George Tenet. So, he wanted to know what additional materials I was going to give to the President or share with the President. So, he said yes or no to that. But, in general, the briefers decide.

Mr. Deutch. Mr. Morell, I would just close by pointing out that, when one of the agencies says that the Russians are putting a bounty on the heads of American soldiers, that someone in that room, one would think, would care to share that information with the President of the United States. And when this information comes out months later, the response from the President of the United States, out of respect for the families who lost loved ones in Afghanistan, should not immediately come to his own defense, but should try to get to the bottom of what happened. Fixing the problem is not about the PDB; fixing the problem is making sure that the President is looking out for the protection of our troops and potential Russian efforts, first and foremost. That is what I think needs to be about.

And I yield back.

Mr. Castro. Thank you.

We are going to go to Mrs. Wagner.

Mrs. Wagner. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Chairman, for hosting this very important hearing on the absolutely shocking allegations that Russia is paying Taliban-linked militants to attack our service men and women. If these reports are, indeed, true, we must take strong and swift action to show Russia that attacking Americans is never acceptable and will be met with a swift and strong response by the United States of America.

Russia has proven that it will exploit any opportunity to undermine and roll back American influence, even at the cost of

destabilizing regions and prolonging bloody conflict. This is evident in its malign involvement in civil wars, unrest, and conflicts in places like Ukraine, Syria, and Venezuela. Russia's actions are reprehensible, and I am proud to have supported robust sanctions against the Putin regime.

Dr. Wallander, you noted that reports of an alleged Russian bounty program with the Taliban indicate an escalation in Russia's long-running asymmetric competition with the United States. Does this illuminate any vulnerabilities in our deterrence against Russian asymmetric operations and how can we restore the credibility of our deterrence?

Dr. Wallander. Thank you very much for your question.

I think that the vulnerability lays in our failure to track Russian activities closely enough and with enough confidence to be able to take counteractions. What do I mean by that? It is exactly by operating in this gray zone that Russia hopes to have the advantages of these operations without suffering the kinds of consequences we have talked about--their exposure, American military commanders taking countermeasures, being called to account by political leadership, potential financial sanctions. I would look at disruptive activities that the United States could undertake to complicate these kinds of operations.

So, we have to get serious about this, not only because of this incident, which I do think, if it is true, is an escalation because it exhibits a willingness to take risk for a direct connection between Russian action and American military fatalities. And it suggests that the constraints of risk aversion that we have referred to earlier might be being lost.

Mrs. Wagner. Russian military intelligence, or GRU, is behind a string of attempted assassination and coups, frankly, across Europe, including in the Balkans where Russia is seeking to exploit existing divisions to slow or prevent regional countries from integrating into the European Union or NATO. I am deeply concerned that Russia is fueling ethnic divides in the interest of weakening Balkan States. Mr. Brzezinski, how can we work with our NATO partners to prevent the GRU from undermining progress in the Balkans?

Mr. Brzezinski. Thank you, ma'am.

I would just add on Celeste's point that, if you look back at 2008, how quickly President Putin backed off when he was confronted with the possibility of a direct red-on-blue engagement--that is, when he was confronted with the possibility he might have to shoot at American soldiers--compared to 2018 in Syria and today with the allegations of putting bounties on American soldiers, and in 2018 where Russian paramilitaries actually attacked a U.S. outpost, this shows how Russian aggression, assertiveness, and provocations have escalated. And if we are really going to curb, deter, contain, push back Russia's actions in this area, I think we have to have a much firmer posture across the board. We cannot be willing to invite him or initiating invitations to the G7s. The political isolation has got to be real and sustained. Our economic pressure has to be much harder.

In addition to some of the sanctions that Celeste was talking about, I would seriously consider pulling Russia from SWIFT. Really hammer its financial sector. Yes, this will cause pain and a lot of collateral economic damage on people who shouldn't be held responsible for Putin's actions in Russia, but that is a geopolitical reality. If we really want to shake up Putin, we have to shake his political base, his political stability.

And militarily, we need to be more prepared to push back against Russia. And I am very concerned about our posture in Europe. Although we have made progress in recent years, it is

still an inadequate posture to competently deter Russian aggression, particularly in North Central and Eastern Europe.

Mr. Castro. Time is up---

Mrs. Wagner. Thank you, Mr. Brzezinski. I believe my time has expired and I will yield back.

I have several other questions, Mr. Chairman, and I will put them into the record.

Mr. Castro. Sure. Yes.

Mrs. Wagner. Thank you.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Mrs. Wagner.

And just for everybody, please, so that we can get to all the members on the committee, as you are asking questions, if you can glance on the grid at the time as it is coming down.

For the witnesses, I know that you all have a lot to say, and we appreciate your expertise, but if you all can also be mindful of the time, so that we can get to everybody and help everybody ask all questions. All right?

We are going to go to David Cicilline, and then, I am going to try to go back to Mr. Zeldin of New York right after that. David?

Mr. Cicilline. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you, Ranking Member McCaul, for calling this really important hearing.

I want to begin by saying I disagree with my friend, Mr. Kinzinger, who said, if you are a Republican, this is nothing; if you are a Democrat, this is serious. If you are an American, the idea that there is intelligence that the Russians may have, in fact, been paying a bounty on the heads of our American soldiers is outrageous and demands a whole-of-government response.

But I want to get, first, to this Presidential Daily Brief because some people have suggested that, oh, you know, it can be an innuendo; it could be a rumor. And so, Mr. Morell, I want to ask you, in order to get into the President's Daily Brief, isn't it a fact that there has to be a sufficient amount of evidence that it is a credible statement of fact? It is sort of the gold standard among the intelligence community? Rumors and innuendos do not make it into the President's Daily Briefing?

Mr. Morell. So, I would agree with you. I would just change one word. I would change ``fact'' to ``assessment,' ' right? It is an assessment that Putin is providing these bounties, and it may not be a fact, but it has to be credible in order to get in there, yes, sir.

Mr. Cicilline. Right. So, this idea of just rumors, unsubstantiated rumors do not make it into the Presidential Daily Brief. And I think the President has acknowledged that it was in the President's Daily Brief, or at least he said he did not read, he was not briefed on it, and he did not read it, which presents its own problem. Kind of the consequences of a President who does not read the Daily Brief is, in and of itself, alarming.

But, in addition to that, the National Security Advisor, Mr. O'Brien, acknowledged publicly that he had begun to develop, along with the other appropriate officials, a set of responses to this activity by the Russians, a set of options to present to the President. And is it fair to say that you do not go through the arduous process of developing a set of responses without having some confidence that the intelligence that you have collected is accurate, credible, and worthy of action?

Mr. Morell. In my experience, yes, sir.

Mr. Cicilline. Mr. Morell?

Mr. Morell. I was just going to say, in my experience, sir, yes, you would need credible intelligence in order to start that process.

Mr. Cicilline. And so, in this context, we have President

Trump who has fawned over President Putin. On the campaign trail, he repeatedly complimented Vladimir Putin. He denied that Russia interfered with U.S. elections. In 2017, in an interview with Bill O'Reilly, when he was asked about Putin being a killer, he said, you know, there are a lot of killers; do you think this country is so innocent? And then, in 2018, at the Helsinki Summit, Trump incredibly sided with Putin over our own intelligence community about Russia interfering with our elections. He has withdrawn from the Open Skies Treaty, which benefits Russia. He has proposed reducing U.S. forces in Europe. So, it is in all of that context. Putin has annexed Crimea, remains steadfastly hostile to Ukrainian democracy in violation of international law, and just last week we saw him again, as a dictator, extend his term in office until 2036. So, it is in this context that reporting that the President failed to act or even condemn this action by the Russians is so outrageous.

And so, my first question is to you, Mr. Brzezinski. This, it seems to me, suggests the absence of

[audio malfunction]. The President is not really interested in doing it. But would it, in fact, be helpful if we actually had a strategy to contain Russia when we needed to and to engage with them when we needed to, and what should that look like?

Mr. Brzezinski. Sir, I missed part of your question, but I understood it is, basically, do we have a strategy for dealing with Russian assertiveness?

Mr. Cicilline. And should we? Do we have one, should we, and what should it look like?

Mr. Brzezinski. I think right now, and unfortunately, I think this is true across the last several Republican and Democratic administrations, we have really had kind of an ad hoc strategy. It has been reactive and it has been incremental. What we really need to be doing is leveraging the full spectrum of power that we have to deal with Russia. And that power includes our economic might. I think we ought to be leveraging more economic sanctions. And think about it, we are a \$17 trillion economy; Russia is somewhere between 1 and 2. We have, with the Europeans, a 34-to-1 advantage in GDP comparison. We ought to be hammering the Russian economy on this if we really want to be serious about convincing Russia to take a different course of action.

On the political side, we can impose more aggressive political sanctions on Russia. And then, also, as I have pointed out, we need to adjust our military posture.

Mr. Cicilline. Thank you.

And, General Nicholson, my last question, if the allegations that are reported in The New York Times are true and Russians placed bounties on the heads of American soldiers, what should the President of the United States do to ensure that service members' families and the American people gain some comfort in knowing that we are doing everything we can to protect the men and women in uniform and to ensure that the Russians know that we will not tolerate this and we take this action very seriously?

General Nicholson. Yes, what you just said, sir. We should let the American people know that we will do it, and then, that would be visible by, as I mention in my recommendations, very highest levels of our government, drawing a clear line that this is unacceptable.

Mr. Cicilline. Thank you.

Mr. Castro. All right.

Mr. Cicilline. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Mr. Cicilline.

Mr. Zeldin. hopefully, we have got you now. I still cannot

hear you. Yes, now it says you are on mute there. Yes, it is not coming through. Yes, sorry about that.

I will go to the next Republican, Mr. Curtis. Mr. Curtis?

[No response.]

How about Burchett? Okay.

Mr. Burchett. Can you now hear me?

Mr. Castro. Yes. Oh, yes, we can hear you.

Mr. Burchett. I hate cutting in front of everybody, especially my colleague Lee Zeldin, who I make him look good on the baseball diamond. I am a consensus fourth stringer on our baseball team, in case you all did not know that.

And it is a pleasure being here with you all, and thank you all. I am very interested in this topic. I have talked about it on the news. I have gotten busted from both sides on it.

And I think it is pretty much known that Putin is a thug. I mean, I am sure he quakes in his Gucci loafers when he hears that the 435th most powerful person in Congress isn't a fan of his, but I think he is a thug. I do not know why there is any fascination with either side on him.

We know that Russia has been helping the Taliban through political, maybe even material means since 2016. The Russians justify this because of the rise of the Islamic State.

Now the--I am not sure if I say it right--but the Khorasan Province and the ISKP and their view that the Taliban is less of a threat to their security, and my question is this: what do the Russians gain by paying the Taliban to kill our troops if we have a shared enemy in the ISKP? And you all just jump in. Ma'am, why do not you go? Ladies first. I am in the South, so that is--go ahead.

Dr. Wallander. Thank you, sir. I am happy to address that.

I think the goal of Russian policy now--and General Nicholson pointed to this as well--is to get the United States out. There was a shift about half a decade ago where Russia was ambivalent. It saw some common interests in fighting fundamentalists and extremists, but, after it invaded Ukraine, and the United States took firm action to lead especially Europe in sanctions and isolation, the Russian leadership evaluated that the threat of the United States being nearby militarily, not just NATO in Europe, but in the Middle East and in Central Asia--remember, Russia worked to kick the U.S. out of the air base in Manas, Kyrgyzstan as well. That was the goal, to get us out and to benefit from our departure, plain and simple, I think by the period of this incident.

Mr. Burchett. For the rest of you all, I would be curious what you have to say.

General Nicholson. Yes, I will jump in, sir. General Nicholson here.

I agree with Dr. Wallander. There was a lot of hedging activity, we would call it, I would say, as it was unclear what the United States' intentions were near the end of the Obama Administration. And we had a stated intention to leave. We did see Pakistanis, Iranians, as well as Russians, all getting involved, I think to gain some influence in what was going to be the environment after we left, after the U.S. and NATO left.

So, I think a part of it was motivated by a desire to gain leverage, and then, another part is their legitimate concern about the spillover of terrorism into Central Asia and Russia. However, this was overstated and this was called their misinformation campaign, suggesting that the United States was supporting ISIS, and, in fact, it was deliberately promoting it.

So, I think there is a combination lens, as with many things, with truth and fiction, as they pursued their overall goal, which is to undermine us, to undermine NATO. They did not want to see us be successful there and they wanted us out of

the region.

Mr. Burchett. Thank you.

Mr. Morell. Congressman, if I could add just one thing, I agree with everything that Dr. Wallander and General Nicholson said. I would just add that this is about Afghanistan, but it is also about outside of Afghanistan. This is about reminding Americans that, wherever you go in the world, it might not be safe. And they want us to think twice about sending troops anywhere. So, this is a pretty broad policy as well as Afghanistan-specific.

Mr. Burchett. All right. Real quick, I am running out of time, but what can we do to make sure this does not happen again? We can talk all these broad statements, but bottom-line me. I am in east Tennessee; we need to cut to the chase. Ma'am, what do you think bottom line? I have got 40 seconds, so 10 seconds apiece.

Dr. Wallander. A political message, but also disruption operations. The GRU can operate like this because it can travel to Europe. It can use international financial institutions. And if it did not have access to those resources, it would not be able to engage in these operations.

Mr. Burchett. General?

General Nicholson. Sir, I would say, No. 1, strongly and clearly and unequivocally State this is unacceptable. And then, second, the other things that they are interested in, and this is why I suggest suspending any talk of withdrawing troops from Germany.

Mr. Burchett. Mr. Morell, I have got 1 second.

Mr. Morell. Sir, I would say you have to play to Putin's fears. And what he fears is his middle class coming out into the streets of Moscow and saying they want change and they want him to go away. And that is why I agree fully with Mr. Brzezinski that the sanctions need to be broad-based and should not be targeted. They should be broad-based.

Mr. Burchett. Great. Thank you all.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I appreciate all you all.

Mr. Castro. Thank you.

Mr. Burchett. And I actually miss you guys in person. I know it is not the same without me being there live. So, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, Ranking Member, as always, it is good seeing you, Brother.

Mr. Castro. Ms. Titus?

Ms. Titus. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank my colleagues and the panel for giving us very detailed discussion about the issue of bounties. But I want to look at this from a bigger picture, as we have started to do. I think Mr. Brzezinski said that our policy over several administrations has been ad hoc and reactive, and we know that. You just go back to Obama. We had the reset with the red button. That was pretty optimistic. People thought we were going to accomplish a lot, but it fizzled pretty fast, and then, ended up with Crimea and sanctions and adoptions being denied and interference in elections.

So now, we have got a new President and a new policy, if you can call it a policy. Nobody has come up with a name for it because it is so confusing. The President talked about Putin in his campaign and praised him, but, then, on the other hand, he said, ``I've been more aggressive against Russia than any other President.'` And then, I think you, Mr. Chairman, laid out all the things that have happened in recent days that show how the President feels about Mr. Putin.

We have heard some grand strategies now for what our policy should be, but I do not see any of those being put into effect by this administration, judging from his recent behavior. But I

am optimistic. I think we are going to have a new President here in a few months. So, I would like to talk about what difference that will make. Will that cause Putin to change his policy, as he deals with the new President? The fact that he is going to be there until 2036, he thinks, will that affect his behavior? How can we now get back into multilateral relationships to change the new reset or a new policy? And how can we more effectively deal with his plausible deniability, like the Wagner Group that he often hides behind? So, given those major changes that I anticipate will come in November, could you kind of address how you think that will affect what our policy toward Russia will be?

Mr. Brzezinski. If I could, I will take a stab.

Ms. Titus. Thank you.

Mr. Brzezinski. Whether it is a Trump administration or a Biden administration, there are four kind of elements I would have for effecting Russia's strategy.

One is to ratchet up political isolation of the Putin regime, so he does not get legitimacy, political legitimacy, and stature through fora like the G7.

Second, I would enhance our military readiness in key frontiers. I focus most on Central Europe, but that is one area we ought to be continuing to enhance our military readiness, particularly for high-intensity conflict.

Third, as I mentioned several times, we ought to enhance our economic pressure, really impose economic pain on Russia.

And then, fourth, kind of following the point that was inferred by Director Morell and Dr. Wallander, we ought to really think about our own strategy disruption against Russia. In the same way that Putin has been mucking around in our politics and the politics of our allies and partners, we ought to be leveraging his own political weaknesses by leveraging our asymmetric advantages and asymmetric tools like cyber warfare and information operations.

His political stature isn't as strong as he would like it to be. And the more we could create a certain amount of uncertainty within Russia about his own political well-being, the more likely he is going to be focused inward.

So, the combination of this external pressure and a strategy of disruption that affects his internal stability I think is in order for more effective Russia policy.

Ms. Titus. Dr. Wallander?

Dr. Wallander. I would agree with what Mr. Brzezinski said in terms of the focus of the strategy. And I would just observe, also, that if you are going to focus on isolation, greater defense spending, and better planning, especially in Europe, and not only in Europe, and economic pressure, the United States needs to do it in coordination with allies and partners, because, otherwise, it is not effective.

Sanctions escape, it is easier for Russia to do if the United States isn't coordinated with Japan, the other members of the G7, and certainly with Europe, given the importance of the European economy to Russia. So, we need to rebuild those alliances and partnerships, both because they are good for America, but if we want to have an effective strategy for coping with Putin's Russia, we have to do it with those strong allies and partners.

Ms. Titus. Thank you.

And, Director Morell, any addition?

Mr. Morell. Ma'am, just to answer your direct question about Vice President Biden, I think the important thing is that Putin will test him immediately. And the Vice President will need to respond along the lines that all four of us are suggesting in order for Putin to be constrained. And if the Vice President does not respond that way, then Putin will see

an open field ahead of him. So, he will test within the first few months a new President.

Ms. Titus. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Ms. Titus.

We are now going to try one more time Mr. Zeldin. I think he has fixed his computer and it may be working for him now.

Mr. Zeldin. Mr. Chairman, do you have me?

Mr. Castro. I do.

Mr. Zeldin. All right. So, thank you. Thank you, Chairman.

First of all, I would like to State that I view Russia in many ways as an adversary of the United States. Vladimir Putin thinks he is 7 feet tall. If he could have his way, he would put the USSR back together again. That is where I come from.

But, first, I am approaching this from a position of facts. I have been trying over the course of the hearing to follow a bunch of bad assumptions to take the story into different directions and it is unfortunate.

But, first off, before I get into some of that, to followup on the exchange just now, as the question was presented conclusively that Joe Biden was going to get elected in November, and how would that impact his relationship with Vladimir Putin, if we are going to go there, to complete the record, yesterday he released a 110-page agenda, and nowhere in those 110 pages does it mention Russia or terrorism once. It does mention other nations and, obviously, a lot of other priorities. So, to help answer that question of my colleague.

To also help cleanup one thing that Mr. Morell said about declaring the briefer in the room as a junior briefer, this is a 30-year CIA briefer. The woman who briefed the President is a 30-year career staffer.

Next----

Mr. Morell. Sir?

Mr. Zeldin. No, thank you. Please, it is my time now. You had your opportunity. So, we will cleanup a few things.

Next, we are following what really was the Susan Rice version in her op-ed in The New York Times. That is that there was compelling evidence, there was a conclusion based on compelling evidence that Russia placed a bounty on U.S. service members and that the President was briefed. Now I do not know, Ms. Wallander, if your assumption that you come into this hearing is following the Susan Rice assumption. I do not know what you might disagree with of what Susan Rice wrote in her op-ed, but having known the rest of the facts and not playing along with story time here at this hearing, there are important facts that should be understood, so we could have a productive conversation.

So, there was a PDB that was given in written form to the President of the United States. In that PDB, there was a concern expressed that is an appropriate topic of this discussion today and this hearing. In it was also a dissent. That 30-year career CIA briefer shows up at the briefing and chooses not to brief that information because she disagrees with it. So, the President was never told that in the briefing.

Now I am having trouble playing along with ignoring the facts, to call it ``a junior briefer'' and ignore 30 years of service in the CIA. I have trouble playing along with the reality that there was some kind of a conclusion on this based on compelling evidence that there was not a dissent and the President was told this.

So, with all that being said, with a couple of minutes I have left, first off, General Nicholson, I have a tremendous amount of respect for you. Thank you for your service to our country. We have spent multiple Christmas days in Afghanistan. You have sacrificed a ton for your country, and as you know, I have a tremendous amount of respect for you.

And actually, it has been on those trips with you and your team where I learned a lot about Russian interests in Afghanistan and the way that they meddle with the Taliban, and otherwise. So, I know that you are a subject matter expert on it.

I just want to hear your thoughts on the fact that there was classified information that was leaked to The New York Times and how that impacts the process.

General Nicholson. [Audio malfunction.] Having said that, as you know from our conversations there--and thank you for your many visits to the theater and for checking on the troops and the dialog with us--we have been watching the Russians for some time and we are concerned about their behavior. And so, having this hearing, having this conversation, getting this up on the radar screen, I think is a form of pushback on Russian behavior.

And this opportunism that the Russians have demonstrated in Afghanistan and elsewhere, in my experience militarily when we respond and we identify they are trying to exploit an opportunity and we respond effectively, that is one of the ways that we can cause him to look elsewhere, if nothing else, and to dial down on what they are doing.

So, I thank the members for having this hearing and getting this on the screen. They will be watching this and they will know that we are watching them.

Mr. Castro. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Zeldin.

Mr. Zeldin. I guess

[audio malfunction] does not want to answer the question.

I appreciate it. Thank you.

Mr. Castro. Thank you.

And, Mr. Morell, I know you wanted to say something. Your words were directly addressed. If you want to make a quick response, that would be fine.

Mr. Morell. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Zeldin misrepresented my statement. I did not say she was a junior officer. I said she was the most junior officer in the room. That is a very significant difference.

Mr. Castro. Okay. Thank you.

All right. We are going to go to Mr. Lieu.

Mr. Lieu. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And I want to thank all the panelists for being here today.

I think it is very instructive to note what the White House has not denied. The White House has not denied that the CIA assessed that Russia paid bounties to the Taliban to kill U.S. troops. The White House has not denied that the CIA made this assessment with a medium level of confidence. The White House has not denied that this information was included in the President's Daily Brief in February.

The main excuse from the White House is that Donald Trump was not orally briefed on this issue, but that excuse has now gone away because, for at least nearly 2 weeks, the President has seen the news coverage on this issue, first, coming out of The New York Times, and then, being confirmed by The Washington Post, by NBC, by The Wall Street Journal, and multiple other press outlets. And the President has yet to utter a single word condemning Vladimir Putin.

But the President has found time to criticize NASCAR driver Bubba Wallace. The President has found time to play golf on numerous outings. What kind of message does that send to Vladimir Putin?

And I have heard some of the strong comments from my Republican colleagues and I appreciate them, that Russia is not our friend. But those are just empty words if you cannot even condemn Donald Trump for not saying a single thing about Russia placing bounties to kill our troops.

And so, Mr. Morell, I have some questions for you. You had said that, if intelligence had a medium level of confidence or higher that this was happening, you would expect the U.S. in a normal administration would have taken action right now, is that right?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir.

Mr. Lieu. Okay. And I heard some of my Republican colleagues use a word, you know, ``verify'' or ``validate.'' That is not how intelligence works at all, right? You just have confidence levels. It is nearly impossible to verify or validate a fact. For example, when Obama sent in a strike to kill Osama bin Laden, no one was 100 percent sure that Osama bin Laden was there, isn't that right? You just have confidence levels in intelligence?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir, you never have certainty in intelligence.

Mr. Lieu. And based on numerous non-denials from the White House, it is very clear this is not a hoax. And so, what I want to understand is--and this is for any of the panelists--what kind of message is this sending to Russia and Vladimir Putin when the President of the United States cannot still utter a single word condemning Russia, not just for the bounty program, but just for generally arming the Taliban, right? No one disputes that. And the President cannot even condemn that. So, what kind of message do you think, Panelists, that sends to Russia?

Mr. Morell. So, I will jump in first here, Congressman. Vladimir Putin, one of his strategic tactics, or one of his tactics, is to divide us as a people, is to have us at each other's throat. So, he must be very pleased with the arguments we are having politically about this issue.

Mr. Lieu. So, let me followup on that. I find it fascinating that so many Republicans are bending over backward to give Russia the benefit of the doubt. I do not understand that. I personally served on active duty in the United States military. It is very clear that Russia is not our friend and Putin is not our buddy. We should not be giving Russia the benefit of the doubt. We should be giving the CIA the benefit of the doubt.

I also wanted to make another point, which is the Republicans are bringing up, for example, Soleimani and how there is also intelligence about him. Well, yes, and Democrats agreed there was a lot of intelligence on him and that he was a bad guy. That was never the dispute. Intelligence was never the dispute. The dispute was, was there appropriate use-of-force authorization to take him out? I believe there was not. And second, what was going to be the consequences if we did that?

In this case, this is an issue regarding intelligence. The CIA has made this assessment, and the President of the United States still has not been able to condemn Vladimir Putin. I cannot understand that, and for Republicans to remain silent on this, you are rewarding Putin.

And with that, I yield back.

Mr. Castro. Thank you, Mr. Lieu.

I will now go to Mr. Keating from Massachusetts.

Mr. Keating. Thank you.

I have a question for Dr. Wallander, but for the rest of the panel as well. When we look at what we do in response to Russia, we are always, first, looking at sanctions, and certainly sanctions, including individual sanctions, should be explored, particularly with some of the oligarchs, I believe. But the question is this: I would like your comments on how much more effective it is to work in concert with these responses, particularly with our European allies. And just this go-it-alone strategy, when we do get around and the President

does get onboard, sometimes reluctantly, to these sanctions--I mean strengthening NATO, working harder and more visibly for Ukraine independence reform, working on energy issues. Financial transparency issues and money laundering issues are important as well. These are the things, we should take an across-the-board approach in terms of reacting to Russia's malign activities. And how important it is to work in concert, I believe. But can you reflect on your experience in the go-it-alone versus an allied approach?

Dr. Wallander. Well, thank you very much, sir.

In order to be effective with economic or financial sanctions in the case of Russia, you, the United States, have to coordinate with Europe to be effective for a couple of reasons. One is the volume of trade between Russia and Europe far exceeds that of the United States. U.S. trade with Russia is something like 2 percent of our global trade. So, to have impact, you have to look at Europe.

Second, a lot of Russian financial transactions end or go through Europe. So, if you do not coordinate with Europe on financial, banking, financial institution transactions, there are workarounds that the Russians are very clever. You know, I sometimes say, if they put as much energy into running a real market economy, their economy would be a lot more successful. They are really good at workarounds. And so, to get to do those workarounds without the United States coordinating with Europe, you are just not going to be effective.

And the last point I would like to make is I agree with Mr. Brzezinski that we should be looking at, if you want impactful economic sanctions, that you should be looking at sectoral sanctions. You can only sanction the oligarchs so many times. Many of the oligarchs are actually not politically influential or even close to the Kremlin. So, for impact, sectoral sanctions are important and targeted sanctions on the defense and security elite that is so core to the Putin leadership. If you want to be effective, you need to think in terms of targeting those areas.

Mr. Keating. And in terms of the Wagner Group, and you look at their activities in Crimea, Syria, now in Libya and parts of Africa, what theaters that we may not be looking at where you would be keeping a watchful eye on the Russians going forward?

Dr. Wallander. Going forward, I think we need to look at Central Asia, for many of the reasons General Nicholson pointed to. I think that I am concerned also about that the Russian government can use the Wagner Group for deniable training of some countries in Europe or in the Middle East. And once they are there, they tend to have influence, and then, they tend not to play by the international rules of the game. So, I think beginning to treat the Wagner Group as more quasi than private would strengthen the ability of the United States to counter these kinds of destructive asymmetric operations.

Mr. Keating. Last, in the hearings we had this week in our subcommittee, they stressed the importance, our witnesses, of not moving away from the option of dealing directly with the Russian people, giving them information. Many of Putin's activities are not well received in Russia. In fact, if they did know the truth, instead of what they are getting, it would become a domestic problem for him. Do you believe that is a very important approach we should take, too?

Dr. Wallander. Well, Putin's disapproval ratings have been growing. His approval ratings have been falling as a combination of economic challenges and, also, the challenges of the COVID crisis in Russia. So, there is evidence that Russians do pay attention and do have views of their leadership. And there is also evidence that Russians have, although official media sources inside of Russia are constrained, Russians

actually get their information from a wide variety of platforms that are available to them.

Mr. Keating. My time has elapsed. I am sorry, Doctor. I yield back. But thank you so much for being here with us today----

Dr. Wallander. Sure.

Mr. Keating [continuing]. And to all our witnesses.

I yield back.

Ms. Stiles. Congressman Malinowski, we can turn to you, sir, if you want to begin chairing.

Mr. Malinowski [presiding]. So, it is Mr. Phillips next.

Mr. Phillips. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to our witnesses.

I will start with a few obvious truths. One of which is I am terribly disappointed that Secretary Pompeo once again chooses not to be with us, stonewalls our efforts to provide important oversight on some terribly important issues that we and the rest of the world face.

I am terribly disturbed by Vladimir Putin's ongoing provocations and aggression, all with impunity. I am particularly disturbed and disgusted by the possibility that Russians provided bounties to the Taliban to kill American service men and women. I will not try to continue the litigation of whether it is true or not. We have done so.

But I want to turn to a couple of questions. One of which is--perhaps, General Nicholson, if you might begin--is it even possible that the GRU operates independently of Vladimir Putin?

General Nicholson. I will give you my perspective, with great respect for Director Morell and Dr. Wallander and Dr. Brzezinski. They understand the Russians extremely well.

My perception, there is an almost feudal set of relationships inside Russia. On one level, you could view it that way. People like to deliver outcomes to the center, to the czar, if you will, or to Putin, that they think he will like, that will curry favor. So, there is a dimension to this where people will act independently on what they think the boss wants and deliver that to him. And so, I think that it is possible that there can be independent actors within this system doing things that others in the system might view as reckless or irresponsible.

Mr. Phillips. Thank you, sir.

Do any of our witnesses see it differently?

Dr. Wallander. I agree exactly with General Nicholson's analysis. I would point out that the GRU has engaged in multiple operations that have been exposed and they have not been pulled back. And so, from that, I take it that, while those operations may not have been ordered, they may have been about pleasing the boss and about creative implementation of general directives, we, nonetheless, should hold the Russian leadership accountable because, if they did not like it, they did not stop it. So, therefore, they own it.

Mr. Phillips. Well said. I couldn't agree more.

Some of you have spoken, Director Morell, you spoke about Putin's greatest fear is his middle class in Russia turning against him. Mr. Brzezinski, you talked about the need for a strategy of disruption and creating uncertainty. I think we would all agree that, if we intend to do so--and we should--it must be in conjunction with our allies. And I would welcome perspectives from each of you in my remaining time relative to the State of affairs with our allies. Are we in a position right now with our relationships to do so? Do our allies trust us or are those relationships compromised and perhaps presenting a challenge to some cooperation in that respect?

General Nicholson. I will jump in here, sir. Having led a 41-nation coalition that was built around the core of NATO, I

will tell you, having served in NATO multiple times, it is one of our most important sources of strength in the national security arena. And the protection, if you will, of that cohesion and that strength of the alliance is paramount for our national security. And I know we in uniform took that very seriously. Indeed, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, if you will, especially when it comes to the legitimacy of our actions. It is not just adding up GDPs, adding up military capability, which is significant and gives us enormous strategic advantage over Russia. It is the legitimacy that comes with having 41 nations together in Afghanistan. That is an important source of strength.

Mr. Phillips. But, sir, if I might ask, would you say that those relationships are less strong than they perhaps were as short as a few years ago?

General Nicholson. Well, candidly, as a leader within NATO, I was concerned that some of the comments that we saw and some of the pressure being put on key allies within NATO risks our cohesion. Having said that, it is true that many of our allies have not met their obligation to spend 2 percent of the GDP on their defense, and their readiness has suffered because of it. So, it is not a black-or-white issue. I mean, the allies, given the threat posed by Russia, do need to invest more in their readiness and in their modernization. The way we go about it, though, I think needs to reinforce our cohesion, not

[audio malfunction].

Mr. Phillips. Thank you, sir.

Director Morell, I would welcome your perspective on our allies, our relationships, and whether that has been eroded over the last few years.

Mr. Morell. Sir, I have had many conversations with foreign officials who I used to deal with, and almost to a person, whether in Europe, the Middle East, or Asia, they are concerned about their relationship with the United States. And they tell me that, because of that, they need to hedge, and that that hedging includes increased conversations with both China and Russia. So, I hear that. I hear that almost constantly.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you.

Mr. Phillips. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you, Mr. Phillips.

I am going to recognize myself at this point. And I wanted to start with, to go back to a pretty basic question to you, Mr. Morell. And that is, what is the standard for including a piece of information in the President's Daily Brief? It is more than just that the information is true or likely true; it has to be important, isn't that the case?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir, it has to be important to the national security of the United States of America.

Mr. Malinowski. Right. So, if this information was included in the President's Daily Brief, that would mean that the intelligence community made a judgment that it was important enough for the President.

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir.

Mr. Malinowski. Is that a fair assessment?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir.

Mr. Malinowski. And we do not actually know why the intelligence briefer chose not to orally brief. So, any of that is speculative at this point.

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir.

Mr. Malinowski. Okay. Now, when something is important and it comes to the White House, but there are gaps in the analysis or potentially differences of opinion about the level of confidence, then one of the things the White House can do is to go back to the intelligence community and ask for a deeper dive. And we know that in this case that did happen, that Mr.

Ratcliffe produced a sense-of-the-community memorandum upon being asked by the White House. But what strikes me as odd about that is that it seems as if a White House, if a National Security Advisor felt a real desire to get to the bottom of a piece of information like this, would not he have asked for that deeper dive immediately, in this case several months ago when it was first brought to the attention of the White House?

Mr. Morell. Sir, I would think so. I do not understand the timing in this case, but, yes, I would think so.

Mr. Malinowski. Okay. And are you concerned that the timing might have been related to the media reports rather than to a sense of urgency to get to the bottom of the intelligence?

Mr. Morell. Sir, I just do not know the timing. So, I cannot answer that.

Mr. Malinowski. Understood.

And let's get back to the more important question of the response here. Now we have heard from Secretary Pompeo--and we wish he were here to tell us in person--but we have heard from him that he has raised Russian support for the Taliban on several occasions with his counterpart--I assume Mr. Lavrov--in the Russian government. Ms. Wallander, knowing that, would you say that President Putin would take such expressions of concern seriously if they are only coming from the Secretary of State and they are never coming directly to him from the President of the United States?

Dr. Wallander. One of the things that is clear is that the Russian leadership pays close attention to what it is hearing from different senior levels in the U.S. Government, and when they get mixed messages, they use that to their advantage and cherry-pick the messages they want to hear from the messages they do not want to hear. So, I think it does matter that if it is the case--and I do not know if it is the case--that they have not heard a consistent, clear, strong message on concern in this area from several senior leaders of the U.S. Government, they would read into that that they do not need to worry about it and it is not a strong U.S. expression of concern.

Mr. Malinowski. And they do recognize the President speaks for the United States above all others. I mean, we do know--we do not know exactly what was discussed--but we do know, because it has been publicly reported, that President Trump has spoken to President Putin on the phone something like a half dozen times in the last couple of months. That, in and of itself, is a little bit odd or out of the ordinary, would not you say from your experience?

Dr. Wallander. The frequency of calls isn't necessarily unusual. President Obama spoke frequently with Vladimir Putin during the escalation in the Ukraine crisis in order to be able to let him know we knew what was happening and what we were planning to do to counter Russian actions. So, the frequency itself might not be. It would depend on what the content of the message was.

Mr. Malinowski. Right. But if Pompeo is saying, ``I am concerned about what you are doing in Afghanistan,' ' and the President is saying, ``I would love to share intelligence with you on counterterrorism. I want to invite you to the G7. I want to have a good relationship with you, and can you believe this Russia hoax?' ' and all of that stuff, how seriously do you think Mr. Putin would take any expressions of concern from the State Department?

Dr. Wallander. If that were the content of the messages, that would be a very mixed message, and the expressions of concern from the State Department would not rise to the level of serious.

Mr. Malinowski. Okay. Thank you so much.

My time is up, and I would like to recognize Mr. Allred. Thank you.

Mr. Allred. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I really want to thank our panel for their excellent testimony and your excellent written testimony.

I think that many of my colleagues have covered very ably a lot of the ground that I wanted to discuss, but I want to begin by noting that I have not been privy to the intelligence around this incident. But I agree with Mr. Brzezinski that the fact that bounties are even plausibly in place on American service men and women shows that our policy toward Russia is, at the very least, completely ineffective at deterring their aggression. And we know, as General Nicholson has noted, that the Russians have provided arms and support to the Taliban that have been used against American service members. So, whether we accept this intelligence or not, or whether the President was briefed on this particular instance or not, the President and this administration are clearly on notice as to Russian intentions against us in Afghanistan and certainly may have American blood directly on their hands.

Last November over Thanksgiving, I was in Afghanistan visiting our embassy, Bagram, went to some of our forward-operating bases where our Rangers are training and working with the next generation of Afghani officers. And when I think about those young service members who are working with those young Afghans, and I think of our President repeatedly praising Vladimir Putin, offering ventilators, saying he believes Putin over our intelligence agencies, and, of course, trying to get them readmitted to the G7, among many other things that we could list, it is incomprehensible. And I can find no strategic goal in it. I have no rationale behind it. And so, I am left wondering, what could possibly be motivating these actions?

But my role, and I think our role on this committee, is to try and inform policy and inform our constituents and inform the American people as to what we can do. And while this President may not act, we know that Congress has acted several times during this term to try to take steps, and we were willing to do more.

And so, I do want to ask, what has worked for us in a multilateral and multinational approach in the past to check Russian aggression? What steps have worked, and are those mechanisms still effective? Is it necessary for us to find some other mechanisms? I will ask that to the entire panel, perhaps beginning with Dr. Wallander.

Dr. Wallander. Thank you for your question.

We do have some evidence of what is effective. In the summer of 2014, when Russia provided surface-to-air missiles to the so-called separatists in Ukraine and that missile was used to shoot down the Malaysian airliner No. 17, it was very quickly exposed publicly and the Europeans, in coordination with the United States, imposed significant sanctions on the Russian economy. And the Russians both withdrew those capabilities and stopped--they did not stop their intervention, but they stopped the escalation of delivery of equipment that they had been engaged in and pulled it back and went more covert and more deniable. And that affected their operational effectiveness.

And so, they are sensitive to what we do and the costs we impose. Those costs vary by circumstance. I cannot tell you, I cannot lay out a map of what it would be in every circumstance. My colleagues have suggested some. We have talked about some. But I think the important answer for you is that we know that the Kremlin is cost-sensitive and does respond when we are clear and firm in our policies.

Mr. Allred. Mr. Morell, do you want to add anything to

that?

Mr. Morell. No, I agree 100 percent.

Mr. Allred. Mr. Brzezinski.

Mr. Brzezinski. Sir, I would reiterate it this way: when we are committed to our values, that denies opportunity to autocrats like Putin trying to undercut political cohesion, to undercut the cohesion among our allies. It reduces his motivation to kind of push against liberal democracy and replace it with authoritarian nationalism. When we are steadfast in our military resolve, Putin will be more cautious. We have demonstrated that repeatedly. When we are committed to our allies and partners, when we do not abandon them in the field or withdraw our forces from their territories, Putin is less likely to push against them. And if we are steadfast in leveraging our economic power, Putin does not have any capability to match that, but we have to exercise it.

Mr. Allred. Well, my time is up, but, General, thank you for your service and I am sorry we did not get a chance for you to weigh in. If you have anything you want to add, perhaps the chairman will allow you a few seconds.

Mr. Malinowski. It is fine, if short. Do you have anything to add, sir?

General Nicholson. Thank you, Chairman.

I wanted to add that, you know, war is more like a wrestling match than a chess game. And so, while discussions of confidence levels and assessments are going on on the ground, leaders are taking actions immediately to protect our service members and to respond, and to fill in any gaps. If we do not know with confidence, why not? Well, let's try to cover that gap. So, I would say our teammates, our colleagues that are out there on the front lines right now, they are doing everything they can to protect our service members and they are adapting to this.

The one thing I would add on responding is back to the power of the alliance. So, the legitimacy that comes with 41 nations saying, hey, this is unacceptable; you do not threaten the U.S. and its coalition partners on the ground, that does have power and it shouldn't be underestimated.

Thank you for the question, sir.

Mr. Allred. Thank you.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you. Well said.

I now recognize Mr. Levin of Michigan.

Mr. Levin. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. And I want to thank the ranking member as well for this really important hearing.

And I want to thank all the panelists. We go through a lot of hearings. You all are really outstanding witnesses and I appreciate it.

I want to start with you, Mr. Morell. You said in your testimony that, in your experience, quote, ``Even if it was only vaguely clear that the Russians might be paying bounties to Taliban-associated militants for killing American soldiers, that information would have made its way to the highest levels of the U.S. Government, including the President, before the analysts concluded their work.'' Would you tell us why information like this would have been run up the chains so quickly, even if it was only vaguely clear?

Mr. Morell. Because of its significance, sir. We are talking about bounties on the heads of American soldiers, and the significant strategic step forward that would suggest for Putin's activities against us.

Mr. Levin. Thank you.

Mr. Morell. I worked with a number of National Security Advisors in my time. I do not think a single one of them would not have told the President this information when the National

Security Advisor first heard it, when they first read the raw intelligence.

Mr. Levin. And regardless of politics, obviously. We are all patriots, right? I mean, it is just about our country's interests?

Mr. Morell. Yes, sir.

Mr. Levin. And protecting her? Okay.

So, Secretary of Defense Esper is actually testifying before another committee right now, and I understand that he said, and I am quoting, ``To the best of my recollection, I have not received a briefing that included the word bounty,' ' end quote. He, then, said that he was briefed on intelligence reports that Russia made, quote, ``payments,' ' end quote, to militants.

If this happened during your tenure, is there any chance that this would not have been brought to the Secretary of Defense's attention? And what would the Secretary likely to have done, knowing this, that payments were made in this way to the militants to attack our soldiers?

Mr. Morell. Two thoughts, sir. One is the Secretary of Defense is a recipient of the PDB. So, if it was in the PDB, the Secretary of Defense should have read it or should have been briefed on it.

Second is the Secretary of Defense has, of all the Cabinet members, the most interest here in making sure that this is run to ground, in making sure that his or her soldiers are well cared for and protected. So, I think they would speak the loudest for something to be done here.

Mr. Levin. Thank you.

General Nicholson, I want to ask you a question, sir, about--and I do not mean to be naive, but I really do not know--you have led our troops at every level and our coalition partners. When news like this happens, do our troops find out about it, that this idea that there may have been bounties on them and that the President isn't doing anything about it? I mean, do they hear about this?

Mr. Brzezinski. Thank you. Thank you, sir, for asking.

Information that has to do with what we would call force protection is extremely important. It comes right to the top of the list, because casualties, friendly casualties, be they coalition or Americans, are going to affect the political will to sustain the effort. So, there is a military reason you do that. And then, of course, there is the moral obligation you have to all the members of your team to protect them. So, this is critically important.

I think our service members understand that their chain of command, I mean starting with their leaders on the ground, are committed to their protection. And to be honest, studies of military units, and all that, it is usually your nuclear group that is the most important and your immediate. And I think there is no question in the minds of those service members that their immediate group and their leadership, General Miller in Afghanistan, are going to be doing everything they can to ensure their protection.

Mr. Levin. Everything they can. And then, if they have a question, if it seems in publicly available information that way up the chain that someone may not be looking out for them, I mean, I just worry about the morale of our troops. It just concerns me. Again, not to do with politics, but just, I mean, they are out there defending our country, for God's sake.

General Nicholson. Well, I couldn't agree with you more, sir, in terms of our internal strength and cohesion is one of our greatest sources of strength and effectiveness on the battlefield, and the unwavering commitment. And all of the members, I know all of you have been enormous supporters of our

troops in the field. We deeply appreciate that.

So, sure, it does cause some head scratching from time to time when you see things like this happen.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you, sir. Thank you, Mr. Levin.

Mr. Levin. And thanks for your service.

Thank you. I yield, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you, Congressman Levin.

And I would now like to recognize the member of our committee who in a past life might have been the person analyzing and briefing this information, Congresswoman Spanberger.

Ms. Spanberger. Not to make light--thank you, Mr. Malinowski--of a prior comment, but at the time that I left the agency I was far too junior to have the role of briefing the President of the United States, not to mention I was on the operations side of the house.

[Laughter.]

But I am grateful to all of our witnesses for being here today, for the breadth of information, knowledge, and commitment to service and our Nation that you have demonstrated throughout your careers and continue to demonstrate.

As a Member of Congress, one of my very top priorities is keeping our service members safe. I am personally furious over the allegations that Russia seems to have further endangered our men and women in uniform serving in Afghanistan by putting bounties on their heads with Taliban-linked militants, asking them to target them.

I have been grateful to hear strong denunciations among many of my colleagues during this hearing, but I would urge many of them to go one step further. I would love to hear them call upon the White House to do the same, to stand up to Russia.

And this gets me to my first question, which I will direct at you, General Nicholson. You have raised concerns about Russia and its support for the Taliban for a number of years. And then, separately, we have seen that President Trump has held off in condemning Putin in a whole variety of ways. He has offered him intelligence. He has publicly sided with him over the intelligence community. He has advocated for Russia to join the G8. He has repeatedly given him praise. And then, most notably, he hasn't issued what I think is an important and necessary step, which is, if this is true, Russia will see the full force and strength of the United States across the board politically, economically, and wherever else that may take us for us to protect our U.S. service members. That is what I would like to see.

But my question for you, General, is, when we see these patterns, and patterns of nefarious behavior by Putin and Russian, but, then, also, patterns in the administration that isn't standing up to escalatory behavior, either directed at our country or other Western allies, what do you think that that portrays to Russia? And what sort of calculation do you anticipate or do you assess that they might be making, given the pattern of behavior that they are put up against?

General Nicholson. Thank you, ma'am. Thanks for your service and thanks for your focus on this issue.

I do think, clearly, Putin and Russia are targeting the cohesion of NATO. And so, many of the actions they have taken, not just in this regard, are targeted at that. And if they can erode the cohesion of NATO, if they can convince just one member, one voting member, to not invoke Article 5 if they were to threaten an ally, clearly, these are the kinds of scenarios we have spent a lot of time looking at during my multiple assignments in NATO as a flag officer.

So, I do think they are trying to erode the cohesion, and

they are doing it in multiple ways, as the other witnesses have spoken about eloquently in terms of the information operations, in particular, and we have seen this in America. So, I do think this is something we need to be concerned about.

And the ways we can reinforce cohesion in NATO are leveraging the system. I will give you a quick example. I do not mean to take up too much time. But when you look at the threats initially to the eastern States of the alliance after the invasion of Ukraine, and the actions that NATO has taken then, it took a little while. It is a large alliance. But we now have alliance troops stationed in the East. We have large exercises in the East. We have a regular rotation of forces to the East. Those nations in the East have improved their readiness and posture, new weapon systems, et cetera.

It tends to take longer in an alliance. Everything is harder in an alliance. But the alliance, at the end of the day, is, in my view, the effective mechanism to respond, if that helps.

Ms. Spanberger. Thank you.

And in your testimony, you have noted that mistakes and miscalculations can, in fact, lead to war and they can be particularly dangerous when it comes to our relationship with Russia. What does it tell you, looking at these allegations, that Russia is willing to risk potentially? And I am going to caveat it heavily like a former intelligence officer would. If these things are true, what would that demonstrate to you that they might be willing to risk, given what some of their goals are, among them, disrupting the cohesion of NATO?

General Nicholson. And I will throw in the same caveat on ``if this is true,' ' but I would say, one, it is a miscalculation and a mistake. And so, No. 1, that we would not find out about it. I mean it is clumsy execution. It is poor execution. Their tradecraft was pretty bad if we have received these reports. If they trusted criminal proxies, and those criminal proxies dealt with Taliban criminal proxies, well, they have essentially entrusted the foreign policy of Russia to criminal proxies in Afghanistan. And that was a real miscalculation and very sloppy on their part.

What it would say, though, is that they made a mistake, in my view. So, there was a miscalculation that they could pull this off and a mistake in that they have risked that there are strategic consequences for this essentially tactical action.

And the final point I would make is, when Vladimir Putin's approval ratings are the lowest they have been in 20 years, do you really want to risk economic sanctions against Russia over something like this? What is the cost-benefit analysis? And that leads me to believe, again, poorly conceived, sloppily executed, if it turns out to be true.

Ms. Spanberger. Thank you very much, General Nicholson. I appreciate your comments.

And I think reflecting back on the patterns of behavior, I think there is an element here that is unfortunate, in that they might have also made the judgment that they would not taste the level of wrath or retaliation that they would face under any other administration that learned of allegations of bounties being put on the heads of U.S. service members.

I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you so much.

And then, finally, I would like to recognize Representative Houlahan for what I believe will be our last round of questions.

Ms. Houlahan. Thanks, and I do apologize for being late. I was at the hearing that Representative Levin was referring to where Secretary Esper mentioned that he had not heard of bounties, but had heard of payments for the lives of soldiers

and sailors.

And I just wanted, for the record, to read the definition of a bounty, which is ``a sum paid for killing or capturing a person.'` And so, I do not think that we should be getting ourselves caught up in semantics.

I also really want to make sure that I say for the record that, were this intelligence, uncertain as it appears to be, about another malign actor such as North Korea or Iran, we would not be having this conversation about trying to fall over ourselves to explain why this is either not real or actionable intelligence or not something to worry about.

And so, I would love to know, also, from Dr. Wallander or Mr. Morell, if you would not mind just telling me a little bit about what is in it for Russia to offer a bounty on lives of soldiers and sailors? Why would they want to potentially escalate tensions between the U.S. and Russia? Did they expect to be caught or found out? If you could kind of try and characterize for me, and for others, why would this happen and why is this, in fact, an escalation?

Dr. Wallander. Well, thank you for your question. It is a great question, and it cuts to the heart of the discussions about Russia and what it is doing and why it is a threat to the United States.

It is an escalation because it is an act of the Russian, if true, it is an act and a policy of the Russian Ministry of Defense and political leadership to have American soldiers killed. Normally, the United States and Russia seek to deconflict in theaters, like in Syria. Even during the cold war, the Soviet Union and the United States, when they were involved in conflicts in the same region, took great care to not kill one another's soldiers because of the potential escalatory implications. So, that is why it is significant.

Why Russia would want to have American soldiers killed in Afghanistan I still think comes back to wanting to help drive us out, to complicate things. They do not want us there. They do not want NATO there. I know it is more than NATO, General Nicholson, but in the Russian frame it is NATO.

And then, why do it this way? Because they want to exploit the deniability, the asymmetric operations. They want to have the benefit of the action without the costs. And they have been doing this for going on a decade, not at this level of seriousness, but this is part of a pattern that we have seen for quite some time.

Ms. Houlahan. Thank you.

I was wondering, Mr. Morell, if you have something to add to that as well.

Mr. Morell. I was just going to add, to go back for just 1 second to Ms. Spanberger's and General Nicholson's conversation about whether this is in Putin's strategic interests or not, what I think we have seen over a long period of time is Vladimir Putin make decisions that are not in the strategic interests of the Russian State. Over and over again, he has done things that has made it difficult for his country to have any relations with the West, integrate the Russian economy in any way with the European economies. And I think because of his actions, Russia is destined to continue to degrade as a State.

So, he is not thinking about the strategic interests of the Russian State. He is thinking about a very narrow set of interests, about power in the world, being seen as a great power, and being seen as a great leader. It is not about, in his mind, what is in the interest of Russia.

Ms. Houlahan. Thanks.

And with the last minute of my time, I would like to kind of end with General Nicholson. Your testimony that you gave ended with what I think is very true. You said, ``Our long war

in Afghanistan will only end at the peace table.'' So, how do you think that these allegations, if they are true would impact the prospect of U.S. peace with the Taliban?

General Nicholson. Thank you, ma'am.

Unfortunately, they have a negative impact because it indicates the Taliban are not acting in good faith. So, the Russians offered, but if the Taliban accepted, if this is validated, then it would indicate that they are acting against the spirit, certainly, and perhaps even the letter, of the agreement that they signed with the United States a few months ago.

So, I think getting that process on track and having the Taliban deliver on the conditions that they are to have delivered at this point--and that is severing ties with Al Qaeda, that is initiating the dialog with the Afghan government and representatives of the Afghan people--it is a sustained reduction in violence, and that has not happened, either.

So, I think this construct that we have come up with, it is not perfect, but it is the best one we have. It does give us an avenue forward. Like many peace processes, it is kind of, you know, one step forward, two steps back, one step sideways. But I think we need to have the stamina to see it through.

But there is a condition built in that, before we progress to the next level of reductions, they need to meet certain conditions. So, I think if we stick to our agreement and hold the Taliban to it, it gives us our best opportunity to move forward.

Ms. Houlahan. Thank you, General.

And thank you so much for my time. Apologies again for being tardy, and I yield back.

Mr. Malinowski. Thank you so much. Thanks to all the members and our witnesses.

I think this was a very, very interesting and helpful discussion. There is obviously a lot that we do not know. There are some things that we do know, but cannot discuss in a public forum such as this. But I have heard enough to reinforce my concerns about what seems to be just a breakdown in the national security decisionmaking process. I mean, we do know that the President was briefed, but he does not read his briefings. We know that the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Advisor knew about this, but they, too, did not choose to take the initiative to ask the intelligence community to get to the bottom of it.

And while all this was going on, all of the messages that we were sending, certainly from the White House to President Putin, were positive about the relationship, whether the G7 or pulling out of Germany or intelligence-sharing, or all of the other things that we have heard about. That does not strike me as the way any normal administration would react to information like this, even if there was not 100 percent certainty. And all of you, I think, from your different perspectives, have helped to reinforce that conclusion.

So, I am grateful to all of you for your decades of service and for sharing your insights with us today, and to all of the members for their excellent questions.

And with that, the hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:53 p.m., the committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS SUMITTED FOR THE RECORD

[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

Press Conference by Secretary Mattis in Afghanistan

April 24, 2017

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JIM MATTIS: Good afternoon, everybody. Good to see you all.

And I think you're aware of who General Nicholson is, but for those of you who've travelled with me, if you've not seen him before, this is the NATO commander here of the international operation that's been going on for years.

And, as if we needed a reminder, as I stand here before you, of the type of enemy that we're up against, the killing of Afghan citizens, soldiers, protectors of the people, just as they were coming out of a mosque, you know, coming out of a house of worship -- it certainly characterizes this fight for exactly what it is.

These people have no religious foundation. They -- they are not devout anything, and -- and it shows that we -- why we stand with the people of this country against such heinous acts perpetrated by -- and the word gets used often, I think too often, but this is -- this barbaric enemy and what they do. Kind of makes it clear to me why it is we stand together.

I met today with President Ghani. I'd seen him in Europe about two months ago, ladies and gentlemen. And here, we had another focused discussion, here in Kabul, as we worked to align our efforts.

I thanked him for his warm welcome, and it certainly was that, with him and his -- his leadership, for his personal leadership in the midst of very, very difficult times and for the inclusive approach of this unity government, with Chief Executive Abdullah, who also in both our private meeting, the president and I, and also in the larger meeting between our delegations.

We discussed his initiative to make the government of national unity more responsive to all of the Afghan people. And we all recognized the challenges to this government and to that effort presented by enemies of the Afghan people who refused to renounce violence.

As you know, President Trump has directed a review of our policy in Afghanistan as the new administration takes hold in Washington. This dictates an on-going dialogue with Afghanistan's leadership, and that's why I came here.

I talked again with President Ghani, with his ministers, and heard directly and at length from the NATO commander, General Nicholson, in -- in order to provide my best assessment and advice as we go forward, advice to the president, to the NATO secretary general and all the troop-contributing nations with whom I coordinate and collaborate.

Our NATO general -- our NATO commander, General Nicholson is one of our most experienced officers in the field, also one of our most serious strategic thinkers. The teamwork that we enjoy here between the Afghan government, our diplomats and our international military contingency has reached very, very high levels of partnership. In a word, I found it impressive.

Within the new American administration, of course, our review in Washington is a dialogue with Secretary Tillerson and the president and his staff in the

White House. And I'd say that we're under no illusions about the challenges associated with this mission.

2017's going to be another tough year for the valiant Afghan security forces and the international troops who have stood and will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Afghanistan against terrorism and against those who seek to undermine the legitimate United Nations-recognized government of this nation.

If the Taliban wished to join the political process and work honestly for a positive future for the Afghan people, who have suffered long and hard, they need only to renounce violence and reject terrorism. It's a pretty low standard to join the -- join the political process.

But those are my impressions, what I was doing here during these -- these hours that I've been here on the ground, and I can take any questions that you might have.

I've got a couple minutes for questions.

Helene, go ahead, please.

Q: Thank you, both of you, for doing this.

I'd like to ask both Secretary Mattis and General Nicholson whether it's your assessment that the Haqqani network was behind the Afghan base attack last week.

Also, do you think that the Haqqani network may have also played a role in the hospital attack last month, and whether you see any contact under way

between ISIS and Haqqani here in Afghanistan?

And then, separately, for General Nicholson, you've explained that you dropped the MOAB on Achin to clear a tunnel of -- a cave complex of ISIS fighters. Did you also consider the larger strategic message that you might be sending to American adversaries like North Korea and Syria when you made that decision?

Thank you.

GENERAL JOHN NICHOLSON: Thank you, Helene. Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Well, first -- let me take the second question first. The secretary has talked about the strike we conducted in Achin last week. I really have nothing to add with respect to that. I will say we were sending a very clear message to ISIS -- not only to ISIS here in Afghanistan, but also ISIS main.

But they -- if they come here to Afghanistan, they will be destroyed. In keeping with the secretary's intent, they will be annihilated. And so this continuing pressure we're putting on ISIS is achieving that effect, and we're going to keep it up.

To shift to the first part of your question, the Haqqanis and the Taliban both pose a threat this year. We have not seen cooperation between ISIS-K and the Haqqanis, however we're always watching for convergence between the various terrorist groups that we see here.

ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack on the hospital that occurred. The Taliban have claimed responsibility for the attack that occurred up in

Mazar-e Sharif. Again, we don't see the connections between those two groups. But in terms of the way -- what they did during these attacks, there's very much a connection.

As the secretary talked about in his comments, the level of barbarity and cruelty, shooting patients in their beds, killing young soldiers at the mosque in prayer -- they're reaching new lows in terms of their behavior. And this is why the majority of the Afghan people -- something like 87 percent -- reject the Taliban and do not want to see a return of this regime.

And as the secretary said, we are open to -- I know our Afghan partners are open to having the Taliban rejoin peaceful life here in Afghanistan. Thank you.

Q: And the first part of my question, on whether or not you -- you -- is your assessment that the Haqqani network was responsible for the base attack on Friday?

GEN. NICHOLSON: We're -- we're still -- we're still developing that, and -- and we'll let you know as we develop more details. The Taliban claimed credit for the attack...

(CROSSTALK)

GEN. NICHOLSON: ... but, as you -- as you know, Helene, the Taliban and Haqqani are linked. So Siraj Haqqani is the deputy of the Taliban. So we tend to -- to look at them as one quite often. So, in -- in the level of sophistication and the way this attack was conducted -- it's quite possible that the Haqqanis were involved.

Q: Just to follow on this -- ISIS. Hi, Kevin Baron from Defense One. Just to follow, could -- you said you're achieving intended effects on -- on ISIS growing here. Can you say, then, for the record, does that mean that foreign fighters are not coming to -- to Afghanistan? Are your number -- are their numbers dwindling, or are they growing? What's ISIS ability to sustain it? In short, is -- is it the threat that many folks back home are -- are starting to think that it was becoming?

GEN. NICHOLSON: Well, ISIS is certainly a threat globally. ISIS Khorasan province is one of the principal affiliates of ISIS, and so they're attempting to establish their own form of a caliphate here by seizing and holding terrain.

As you're aware, we have begun -- we've been attacking that caliphate since last -- since early last year, reduced it by about two-thirds in size, reduced their fighters by at least half.

We've done this through a series of operations. The latest one started in early March -- continuous pressure on them, and we'll -- we're going to keep going until they're defeated in 2017.

Now, they have an aspiration, I think, to move fighters here from Syria. We haven't seen it happen. And, in fact, by reducing their sanctuary here, or by annihilating them here or (there ?), it should be very clear to ISIS main, there is no space for them to come to in Afghanistan.

Q: Thank you gentlemen for doing this. Thomas Gibbons-Neff from the Washington Post.

If you two could just address the influx of Russian weapons into Afghanistan and -- and showing up in Taliban hands in Helmand, Kandahar and Urozgan,

and what both of you -- I guess, General Nicholson on the tactical and strategic level, and Secretary Mattis on the, I guess, diplomatic level, political level of what you're going to do to stop the Russians from sending these weapons in?

SEC. MATTIS: Well, you know, the -- the Russians seem to be choosing to be strategic competitors in a number of areas. The level of granularity and the level of success they're achieving -- I think the jury is out on that.

I'll let the general talk about any of the specific weapons and all, but the -- the broader strategic framework that you're driving toward -- I would say that we will engage with Russia diplomatically. We'll do so where we can.

But we're going to have to confront Russia where what they're doing is contrary to international law or denying the sovereignty of other countries.

For example, any weapons being funneled here from a foreign country would be -- would be a violation of international law, unless they're coming through the government of Afghanistan for the -- for the Afghan forces. And so that would have to be dealt with as a violation of international law.

But if you have any information on the weapons, add another word?

GEN. NICHOLSON: The -- the only thing I would add to that is that we -- we continue to get reports of this assistance, and, of course, we had the overt legitimacy lent to the Taliban by the Russians. That -- that really occurred starting late last year, beginning through this process they've been undertaking. And, of course, as the Secretary stated, we support anyone who wants to help us advance the reconciliation process.

But, arming belligerents or legitimizing belligerents who perpetuate attacks like we saw two days ago in Mazar-e Sharif is not the best way forward to a

peaceful reconciliation.

Q: So, to be clear, you're not refuting that they're sending weapons to the Taliban?

GEN. NICHOLSON: No, I'm not refuting that.

SEC. MATTIS: Well, go ahead, please.

Q: General, Hans Nichols with NBC News.

The general sitting next to you is -- or standing next to you has said that we're at a stalemate in terms of the U.S. versus the Taliban. He's also requested thousands of more troops. Which one is it? Are you comfortable with the stalemate, or do we need more troops?

SEC. MATTIS: Frankly, I don't see any tension between those two things, those two factors. Right now, we're engaged in defining the challenge, the way ahead, with a whole lot of nations. And it depends -- there's no one nation that's going to carry all this, so there's a lot of collaboration. And that is based on an assessment of the tactical and operational challenge and where we want to be in what time.

So, to -- I'm not going to get into how you would characterize it in one word, but we are going to address that situation and move forward together against the terrorists. And that is exactly why we're meeting now.

And those -- obviously, I owe some degree of confidentiality on where my thinking's at and what I'm going to recommend once I've compiled my notes from this trip and speak to some of our NATO allies about the way ahead.

Q: Let me ask that a slightly different way. Is NATO winning this conflict? And, if not, is it winnable?

SEC. MATTIS: The -- the bottom line is that this fight against terrorism is going to go on. You saw what happened in Paris. You see the French troops engaged down in Africa. You find the NATO -- the NATO-led force -- a lot more than just NATO -- here in Afghanistan. You see what's going on against ISIS in Syria. This fight is going to go on.

We're in an era of frequent skirmishing. It's going to be far-flung, and that's the -- the nature of this fight. And concise, short definitions in one local area or another do not give sufficient credit to -- to really defining the complexity of the issue.

STAFF: Sir, that's all the time we've got. We've got to get you to your next thing. Thank you, guys, very much.

SEC. MATTIS: All right, thank you.

- [H.A.S.C. No. 115-27]MILITARY ASSESSMENT OF THE SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

[House Hearing, 115 Congress]

[From the U.S. Government Publishing Office]

[H.A.S.C. No. 115-27]

MILITARY ASSESSMENT OF
THE SECURITY CHALLENGES
IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED FIFTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

HEARING HELD

MARCH 29, 2017

[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

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One Hundred Fifteenth Congress

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C O N T E N T S

STATEMENTS PRESENTED BY MEMBERS OF CONGRESS

Smith, Hon. Adam, a Representative from Washington, Ranking
Member, Committee on Armed Services.....
Thornberry, Hon. William M. ``Mac,`` a Representative from Texas
Chairman, Committee on Armed Services.....

WITNESSES

Votel, GEN Joseph L., USA, Commander, U.S. Central Command.....

APPENDIX

Prepared Statements:

Smith, Hon. Adam.....
Votel, GEN Joseph L.....

Documents Submitted for the Record:

[There were no Documents submitted.]

Witness Responses to Questions Asked During the Hearing:

[There were no Questions submitted during the hearing.]

Questions Submitted by Members Post Hearing:

Dr. Abraham.....
Ms. Stefanik.....

MILITARY ASSESSMENT OF THE SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE GREATER M
EAST

House of Representatives,

Committee on Armed Services,

Washington, DC, Wednesday, March 29, 20

The committee met, pursuant to call, at 10:02 a.m., in room
2118, Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. William M. ``Mac''
Thornberry (chairman of the committee) presiding.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. WILLIAM M. ``MAC'' THORNBERRY, A
REPRESENTATIVE FROM TEXAS, CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON ARMED
SERVICES

The Chairman. The committee will come to order.

Today, we turn our attention to the Central Command area of
operations, where much of the Nation's military power has been
engaged since 1991. While we are rightfully focusing attention
on other threats, such as a resurgent Russia and a newly
assertive China, the threat of terrorism has not gone away. In
fact, as we discussed at our hearing a few weeks ago, it is
difficult to see how ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] is

totally eliminated from Syria, and Al Qaeda, with its various branches, has not disappeared either.

And while terrorists have physically spread out to more locations, some of them have become quite adept at operating online as well, instigating terrorist incidents in the West.

Of course, Iran poses a significant threat to regional stability, and none of us will forget about the essential fight to prevent Afghanistan from returning to be a base for terrorism. So there is much to occupy our witness today, and I appreciate his being with us to answer our questions.

I also want to mention one additional issue, which has been in the news lately. There have been a number of press reports about civilian casualties in Mosul related to U.S. aerial support of the Iraqi efforts to reclaim that city from ISIS. I would just suggest that everyone be cautious. In a dense urban environment, there may well be civilian casualties, and even the finest military in the world can make mistakes. But we also know for certain that ISIS uses innocent civilians as human shields, and that they can arrange civilian deaths to further their misguided narratives. ISIS uses such narratives to try to advance their cause and to curtail the effectiveness of our military campaign against them. I think we should always give the benefit of the doubt to the professionals who are working every day to keep us safe.

Let me turn to Mr. Smith for any comments he would like to make before turning to our witness.

STATEMENT OF HON. ADAM SMITH, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM WASHINGTON,
RANKING MEMBER, COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

Mr. Smith. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a brief opening statement, which I will simply submit for the record. I echo the chairman's comments about how important this region is to our national security interests, and the challenges there are great.

The only issue I want to highlight, and hopefully have the general discuss a little bit, as we continue in Iraq, the problem, to my mind, continues to be that the Baghdad government is not inclusive enough of the Sunni population. I met with the Sunni tribal leader yesterday. You know, certainly Prime Minister Abadi is trying, whereas Prime Minister al-Maliki did not, but there has not been much improvement. There is still a feeling amongst the Sunni population that Baghdad is more--is closer to Iran than it is to their own Sunni population. And until we fix that problem, whatever happens in Mosul, whatever happens elsewhere, if you have a--you know, disgruntled, dissatisfied, pushed-aside Sunni population in Iraq, you are going to have fertile ground for ISIS or Al Qaeda or whatever extremist groups want to exploit it. So I am curious to hear what we are doing to try and reintegrate the Sunnis into the Baghdad government so that it is not a sectarian Shia government, but a government for Iraq. I think that will be a great challenge going forward.

And with that, I thank the general for his service and his leadership and look forward to the testimony.

I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Smith can be found in the Appendix on page 37.]

The Chairman. General, without objection, your full written statement will be made part of the record. And you are recognized for any oral comments you would like to make.

STATEMENT OF GEN JOSEPH L. VOTEL, USA, COMMANDER, U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

General Votel. Thank you, Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith. For the members of the committee, before I do get into my short statement here, I do want to highlight for you, we have put a map at your--each of your spaces here. There is coverage on both sides. You will see the back side really

focuses a little bit on the Iraq and Syria piece there, and the red kind of blotches kind of highlight where we think ISIS is located currently.

Chairman Thornberry, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear here today to discuss the current posture and state of readiness of the United States Central Command [CENTCOM]. I come before you today on behalf of the outstanding men and women of the command; military, civilians, and contractors along with our coalition partners from nearly 60 nations. Our people are the very best in the world at what they do, and I could not be more proud of them and their families. Without question, they are the strength of our Central Command team.

I have been in command at CENTCOM for about a year now. It has been an incredibly busy and productive period. Over the past 12 months, we have dealt with a number of significant challenges in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Egypt and the Sinai, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and elsewhere throughout our area of responsibility.

We are making progress in many areas, but much, much work remains. We are also dealing with a range of malign activities perpetrated by Iran and its proxies operating in the region. It is my view that Iran poses the greatest long-term threat to stability in this part of the world.

Generally speaking, the Central Region remains a highly complex area, widely characterized by pervasive instability and conflict. The fragile security environments, which reflect a variety of contributing factors including heightened ethno-sectarian tensions, economic uncertainty, weak or corrupt governance, civil wars, and humanitarian crisis, are exploited by violent extremist organizations and terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda and ISIS. These groups have clearly indicated their desire and intent to attack the U.S. homeland, our interests abroad, and the interests of our partners and allies. At the

same time, the Central Region is increasingly crowded with external nation-states, such as Russia and China, who are pursuing their own interests in attempting to shift alliances within the region.

The point that I would emphasize to you is that while there may be other more strategic or consequential threats or regions around our world, today, the Central Region has come to represent the nexus for many of the security challenges our Nation faces.

And most importantly, the threats in this region continue to pose the most direct threat to the U.S. homeland and the global economy. Thus, it must remain a priority and be resourced accordingly. We sincerely appreciate this committee's continued strong support and particularly as it pertains to our budget requests and the funding provided, not only to be CENTCOM, but across the Department of Defense. We could not do what we do on a daily basis without that support.

Meanwhile, the team at U.S. Central Command remains appropriately focused on doing what is necessary to protect our national interests and those of our partners. Our strategic approach is very straightforward: Prepare, pursue, and prevail. And I will explain what I mean by that. We prepare the environment to ensure an effective posture and strong relationships across the region. We actively pursue opportunities to strengthen relationships and support our interests. And when we do put our forces into action, we prevail in our assigned missions.

I would also point out to you that today, to the credit and professionalism of our Armed Forces and coalition partners, we are executing campaigns in the Central Region with significantly fewer U.S. forces on the ground than in previous years. As you are seeing clearly demonstrated in Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and elsewhere throughout our area of responsibility, we have adopted a ``by, with, and through'' approach that places a heavy reliance on indigenous forces.

While this approach does present some challenges, and can be more time-consuming, it is proving effective and is likely to pay significant dividends going forward.

Indigenous force partners continue to build needed capability and capacity, and they are personally invested in the conduct of operations and, thus, inclined to do what is necessary to preserve the gains they have achieved going forward. We also have a vested interest in insuring increased stability and security in the strategically important Central Region. To this end, I will close by highlighting three areas where I do believe if we apply the appropriate amount of energy and effort, we can and will have a lasting positive impact in this part of the world.

First, we must restore trust with our partners in the region, while at the same time maintaining the strong trust of our leadership back here in Washington. The fact is, we cannot surge trust in times of crisis, and we must do what is necessary now to assure our partners of our commitment and our staying power.

Second, we must link our military objectives and campaigns as closely as possible to policy objectives, and to our other instruments of national power. In other words, we must align our military objectives and soft power capabilities with desired national and regional strategic end states, recognizing that if we don't do this, we risk creating space for our adversaries to achieve their strategic aims.

Finally, we must make sure that we are postured for purpose in this region. We must have credible, ready, and present force coupled with foreign military sales and foreign military financing programs that serve to build and shape partner nations capability in a timely and effective fashion.

Ours is a challenging and very important mission. Much is at stake today in the Central Region. We recognize this fact, and I assure you that the CENTCOM team stands ready and willing to do whatever is necessary to protect our national interests

and the interests of our allies and partners.

Let me close by thanking this committee once again for the strong support that you continue to provide to the world-class team at United States Central Command, and particularly to our forces located forward in the region.

As I said at the outset, the 80,000-plus soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, Coast Guardsmen, and civilians that make up the command are truly the very best in the world at what they do, and I could not be more proud of them and their families. And I know that you are proud of them as well.

Thank you, once again, and I look forward to answering your questions this morning.

[The prepared statement of General Votel can be found in the Appendix on page 39.]

The Chairman. Thank you, General. And you are right, we share your pride in them and in what they do.

As we chatted just briefly before the hearing, you expressed interest in addressing some of the press stories regarding civilian casualties, especially in Mosul. Let me invite you to do that at this point.

General Votel. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I appreciate the opportunity to talk a little bit about this right up front.

First off, I want to emphasize to everybody here, all the members, that these are absolutely tragic and heartbreaking situations, and our hearts go out to the people of Mosul, and of Iraq, and other places where we are operating.

We acknowledge our responsibility to operate at a higher standard. It is my responsibility, as a combatant commander, to ensure that our forces operate in accordance with those goals and standards. We take every allegation seriously, and we are executing a--what we have and are executing a well-developed process to assess and, if necessary, investigate each of these allegations.

How we do things is as important as the things we actually

do, and we are doing everything humanly possible to prevent these types of events and incidents from occurring as a result of our operations.

I do agree with Lieutenant General Townsend's comments yesterday--he is our commander on the ground in Iraq--when he said that there is a fair chance that our operations may have contributed to civilian casualties, but I would highlight to each of you that this investigation continues, and there is still much to learn from this.

We have a general officer assigned as the investigating officer to help us address and understand and discover the facts of this case.

We were able to visit the actual site yesterday, and gathered both additional evidence and perspective on this situation. In addition, we are reviewing over 700 weapons systems videos over a 10-day period to ensure--over a 10-day period that followed this alleged incident, to ensure that we understand the effects of the munitions we dropped in this vicinity. This should be an indicator to you of how intensive a combat situation this is.

The investigation will look at command and control; will look at the munitions we employed and the fusing for those munitions; it will look at intelligence; importantly, it will look at the behavior of the enemy; and it will look at how our actions may have played a role in any civilian casualties.

The investigation will confirm or deny our initial impressions and highlight the lessons learned. And while we consider and establish accountability over our actions in this incident, I think it is also important to clearly recognize that the enemy does use human shields, has little regard for human life, and does attempt to use civilian casualty allegations as a tool to hinder our operations. And so they bear responsibility for this as well.

The nature of this fight has evolved over the course of the operation, and on this 2 1/2-year campaign. And our approach

has evolved as well. One example of how we have evolved has been our effort to enable and entrust our leaders at the tactical edge with the authorities they need to help our partners win.

We have not relaxed the rules of engagement. I have authorized Lieutenant General Townsend to delegate the employment of rules of engagement to the appropriate level due to the tough urban fight that we knew was coming in Mosul. To be clear, there were no changes to the types of targets and the rules of engagement that allows us to engage. We are aware of all of the reporting, especially by organizations like Amnesty International, Airwars, the Center for Civilians in Conflict, and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and we have developed relationships with a number of these organizations, and we look forward to working with them as we complete this investigation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman. Let me just ask about a couple of the things you just said, because as you recognized, there is widespread reporting that the rules of engagement have changed, and the implication is now we are carelessly dropping bombs and killing civilians. But as I thought I heard you pretty clearly, the rules of engagement have not changed. Is that correct?

General Votel. That is correct, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman. And you have a long experience in Iraq and dealing with this enemy. How would you describe their ability to create and further narratives that they see is in their interest?

One example that stuck in my mind, I remember in Iraq that after a raid or something, the enemy came and deposited dead bodies, and then brought cameras in to make it look like they had been killed as a part of the raid, when, in fact, they hadn't. They were brought in after the fact. So just describe the sophistication of their efforts.

General Votel. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I would—I

would agree with you, that the enemy that we have faced in Afghanistan, in Iraq, Syria, and other places here is particularly savvy in how they use information operations. ISIS, in particular, is well-skilled in this. They have professionals, if you will, who have expertise in this particular area, and so they know how to manipulate the information environment and create situations that they know will cause concern for us in Western countries.

And as I mentioned in my comments to you, I do believe they do attempt to use our concern to operate at higher standards and to prevent civilian casualties as a way to distract our campaign. So I think it is important that we recognize that. That has not changed how we approach things. It doesn't change our values. It doesn't change our adherence to the law of armed conflict and the fact that we do operate at a higher standard. But I think it is an important thing to recognize about our enemy.

The Chairman. Well, I will just conclude by saying, we want to be informed of the results of the investigation. We share your commitment to make sure we do things the right way. And so--but the investigation needs to occur, and then you see what it finds.

So I will trust you and your folks to keep us fully informed once you are able to reach conclusions on that.

Let me yield to the ranking member.

Mr. Smith. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

If you could answer the question I raised in my opening statement about, you know, where the Sunni population in Iraq is at right now, because it sounds like it is still a very deep divide. And while I, you know, concur with the chairman's comments about the civilian casualties in Mosul, I know that the Sunni population is concerned about the fight that is going on there and the loss of life that is happening from both sides.

They are also concerned about the presence of Shia

militias, Iranian-backed militias, and basically, the general feeling that this continues to be a Shia-run country that is not making room for the Sunnis, and that, you know, undermines our entire effort, I think, to defeat these groups. Is that an inaccurate portrait? Is it better than that? And what are we doing to try to fix what problems remain?

General Votel. Congressman, the way that I would characterize it is, I think in the near term here, as Iraq and assisted by the coalition confronts the ISIS enemy that they are dealing with, there has been some level of local accommodation, some cooperation, some collaboration between different groups, really focused on doing this. I would cite to you our continued efforts to raise tribal forces to bring hold forces into these areas, particularly Sunni areas as--after they had been cleared, we have seen some success with that.

But I would agree with you that long term, there is still much work to be done. I know in my interactions with the prime minister, we frequently talk about this. I know he is very concerned about it, and--but also, I think recognizes the balance that will have to be achieved here in the region with a variety of different interests that are ongoing. And so, I think he clearly recognizes that.

But I would agree with you, more will need to be done to ensure that the Sunni population feels engaged, empowered, and a part of--part of the Government of Iraq and of the Iraqi people.

Mr. Smith. Quick question on that. The issue of arming the Kurds or other Sunni tribesmen, there was, you know, frustration expressed, they weren't able to get those arms directly, and it is our position, our country's position, that all of that has to go through Baghdad, basically. Then I--I understand that to a certain degree.

Is that accurate? And how is that impacting the ability to arm the Kurds and the Sunni tribesmen that we want to fight with us?

General Votel. I believe we have made some--we have made good progress on that over the last year. There certainly were some issues with that in the past in terms of how that was done, but particularly as we got focused on the operation for Mosul, I think we saw a high level of collaboration and coordination between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Government of Iraq, particularly as they prepared their plans and prepared their forces for that operation.

And I would highlight to you that I think one of the--one of the key successes here, and I think this has influenced the Government of Iraq, is the--is a high level of coordination that took place at the military level and security levels as that operation gets underway, and that continues to this day. And I do believe that is a basis for moving forward. That said, it is something that we continue to keep our--keep our eye on.

Mr. Smith. And then looking up to Syria, as we--you know, people prepare for the attack on Raqqa, there is the great question of, you know, you have got the Turks involved there, you have got the Kurds involved there, but they don't get along. When we are trying to figure out what our coalition is in Syria, particularly going after Raqqa, how are we currently deciding the issue between the Turks and the Kurds?

General Votel. Well, there is engagement at the high political level that is taking place. And as you are well aware, the chairman has been a champion for us in working at the chief of defense level and back and forth. We have, from a CENTCOM standpoint, working in conjunction with European Command, we have increased our interaction in Ankara to ensure there is good visibility on the things that we are doing.

And we certainly recognize Turkey's interests and concerns with us. They are a great partner here. We couldn't do many of the things we are doing without them.

That said, the most effective force that we have right now in Syria is the Syrian Democratic Forces that consists of both Kurds and Arabs, Turkmen, and, in some cases, some Christian

organizations.

Mr. Smith. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The Chairman. Mr. Wittman.

Mr. Wittman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Votel, thanks so much for joining us today. I want to get your perspective on what might happen in the future. We see today success happening in Mosul, with pushing out and defeating ISIS forces, both with our forces and with Iraqi forces. The question then becomes, I believe, in the future is what happens after that? And while ISIS is a concern, I believe that Iranian-backed Shia militant groups are an even greater concern. We don't hear a lot about that today, but I do believe that they are a significant issue. The IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] commander, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Shia militant groups in that region, I believe, with Iranian backing, has visions about what would be happening in the future as ISIS has moved out.

Today, as we speak, Iran and the U.S. have common interests in defeating ISIS. The question, then, becomes once ISIS is defeated, Iran has in mind to recreate the Shia Crescent through that region. So by pushing out ISIS, and with the question about how governance takes place after that with the existing government in Iraq, what do you see as the future with us ultimately defeating ISIS, and what happens with these Iranian-backed Shia militant groups, and what happens there, too, with the Iraqi Government in trying to reestablish some kind of governance and control in those regions sans ISIS?

General Votel. Thank you. Thank you, Congressman. I share in your concern about Iran and their long-term intentions here. Certainly, with 100,000-plus Shia militia members on the ground there, this is an extraordinarily--it is an extraordinarily concern, big concern as we move forward.

I--we are engaged, and I know the embassy is well engaged with the Government of Iraq as they look to implement a paramilitary force law in their country. The prime minister, I

know, has appointed a committee that is working through this aspect of it. We certainly have provided advice into that. We have given examples of how we employ national guards and other things here and how we would look at that.

Our concern, I think, with that particular aspect is that the PMF [Popular Mobilization Forces], the paramilitary forces that remain behind, don't become duplicative to the counterterrorism service or to the Iraqi army and those types of things, and that there is a valid role for them, and that they do answer to the government, and that they remain, like the other security services, an apolitical entity, and, so, our very strong focus is in that particular--particularly with respect to the Shia PMF.

Mr. Wittman. Staying on the theme of Iran, looking there in the Arabian Gulf, and more specifically, recently in the Straits of Hormuz, where we had four Iranian mass-attack vessels swarm the USS Mahan, there is a concern about that continued effort, and what they are trying to achieve with that, and what our actions are, or reactions to that might be.

Give me your perspective, first of all, about the frequency of those attacks. What is Iran trying to achieve with that? Those probing maneuvers as I see them, I think, are very indicative of what Iran, I believe, is likely to try to achieve in that area, and that is to harass our ships just enough to stand us off.

Give me your perspective on what you think the Iranians are trying to achieve there and what our reaction to that is, or what we are doing to try to prevent that.

General Votel. Yes. Direct to your question, I think Iran's objective here is to be the regional hegemon. They want to be the predominant power in the region. There is no doubt about that, and I think that is what they are pursuing.

One of the very first things I did after becoming the commander at CENTCOM was to get on a ship and go through the Straits of Hormuz. As an Army guy, I wanted to understand what

this was. And, frankly, the Iranians did not disappoint. Within 30 minutes of being on there, we had boats surround us in the area. I had a chance to observe our ship captain and crew and how they respond to that, and since I have had a chance to see that on a number of different occasions and I get normal reports on it.

I will tell you, Congressman, I am extraordinarily confident in our leaders and in the processes, procedures, and capabilities they have to properly defend themselves.

The presence of these types of boats out there very seldom, if ever, prevent us from accomplishing our missions. I think what they are out there to do is to demonstrate their presence, to, in some cases, potentially be provocative. I think as we--you know, if you look over a course of a year, I think you see probably 300-plus incidents of this kind of nature. About 10 to 15 percent of those we would classify as being abnormal, meaning outside of their normal pattern of life; unprofessional, meaning they are not following proper maritime procedures; or unsafe, meaning that they put themselves or they potentially put our vessel and our crews at risk.

And so, we are paying extraordinarily close attention to this, but I feel very confident in our ability to protect ourselves and continue to pursue our missions.

Mr. Wittman. Very good. Mr. Chairman, I yield back. Thank you.

The Chairman. Mrs. Davis.

Mrs. Davis. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General, thank you for your service. I want to turn to Afghanistan. What kinds of support are the Russians sending to the Taliban, and how direct is their involvement? What does that mean about our ongoing conflict there?

General Votel. Congresswoman, I think there is a lot that we don't know about what Russia is doing. I think it is fair to assume they may be providing some kind of support to them in terms of weapons or other things that may be there. Again, I

think that is the possibility.

I believe what Russia is attempting to do is they are attempting to be an influential party in this part of the world. Obviously, they do have some concerns, because it is in--it is close to former Soviet states that they consider to be within their sphere, so there is some concern about that. But, in general, I don't consider their outreach and linkage to the Taliban to be helpful to what we have been--what the coalition has been trying to accomplish for some time now in Afghanistan.

Mrs. Davis. Could you share with us in your--the state of that accomplishment that you could talk about in this setting?

General Votel. In Afghanistan? Well, I think--I think we have pretty well established, we are at a stalemate right now. Right now, I would say that it is in--generally, in favor of the Government of Afghanistan, but stalemates have a tendency to decline over time. So I think we do have to--we have to continue to support this.

We have two missions in Afghanistan. One is our counterterrorism mission, fully resourced. That is going pretty well. I feel very confident in that. The other one is the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] mission, the train, advise, and assist. That is one where I think we ought to consider looking at our objectives here and how we--how we continue to support that mission going forward and ensure that the Government of Afghanistan has the time and the capabilities to accomplish what they need to.

Mrs. Davis. Yeah. Clearly, I think the governance piece is important. We have, obviously, been working on that as well for some time. But there is a great deal of concern that it hasn't been as robust as is needed in that setting, and I am not sure that I would believe that that is going to increase. I think, if anything, it is probably going to decrease.

Can you comment on that and the importance of that mission?

General Votel. Well, I think that--that, certainly, is a

topic under discussion now with the Secretary of Defense and General Nicholson and myself and the chairman right now. So we are in the process of going through a review of our posture in Afghanistan and how we ought to--how we ought to look at that going forward. I think it is still kind of predecisional at this point, so I am not sure I want to get out in front of the Secretary in announcing anything in particular. But it is a key topic here and one that Secretary Mattis has been very engaged with us on.

Mrs. Davis. Thank you. One of the concerns as well is that the administration now has not been filling all the positions for that region, both--military, perhaps, is more covered than in other departments. But I wonder if you feel that these gaps are becoming problematic, and what should we be doing about it?

General Votel. Well, Congresswoman, I have the benefit of having a Cabinet Secretary who previously held my job, and so he understands the region that I--that I am operating in right now. And I--and we have a very open and communicative relationship here, and so I feel I am getting everything that I need from the Department at this particular juncture.

So I can't tell you that I have--I have been disadvantaged while the transition completes and gets in place.

Mrs. Davis. Thank you. And just following up on my colleague's question earlier about how we are planning for what comes next in Iraq. What is it going to look like? And what is the extent of that planning? You know, how would you see that right now?

General Votel. Well, I think, as I mentioned in my opening statement, I think this has to be--it has to involve more than just the military. And in my advice to the Secretary and the chairman as we began to look at how we move forward in these areas, my principal piece of advice was we have to look at the political preparation of these particular--of these areas and make sure that we are addressing some of these long-term issues, like we talked about a few moments ago, how we

accommodate the different parts of the population; how we have a plan for governance.

There is a lot that the military can do, but it is extraordinarily important that our diplomats, our Department of State, our other development agencies, others are involved in this particular process as well, and that we have a very----

Mrs. Davis. My question----

General Votel [continuing]. Smooth process.

Mrs. Davis [continuing]. Is are they?

General Votel. I believe they are. I feel very confident we are working with our partners on this.

Mrs. Davis. Thank you.

The Chairman. Mr. Coffman.

Mr. Coffman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, General, thank you so much for your long service to this country.

I think it was raised earlier about the concerns about the Sunni Arab population. I mean, the fact is that after we left the country in 2011, that the Shia-dominated government reverted to their worst sectarian tendencies, and I believe pushed out the Sunni Arabs from the government and created an opening for ISIS to spill across the border from Syria and to capture those areas with little to no resistance, because it was simply no loyalty to the government of Baghdad.

In the Iraqi constitution, there is a provision that was insisted by the Kurds--insisted by the Kurds that allows provinces to band together and to create semi-autonomous regions. Should, in fact, the Sunni Arabs look at that, and should we encourage that? It just seems like without a path where they have some say in--they are only 20 percent of the population--in their future--essentially, right now, all the revenue, basically, is from oil, most of the revenue, and so--and that is distributed by the central government out of Baghdad. So it is a tough position that they are in. And so do you have a view on that particular issue?

General Votel. Look, Congressman, as you know, our policy

is one--one Iraq right now. And so that is--as we apply our military operations, that is the context in which we--which we do that.

I would agree with you, though, that there has to be a very serious look at this, and there has--we have to ensure that the different parts of Iraq are represented in their government, in other things that are in their military and other security apparatuses, and other aspects and they have an opportunity to take advantage of the economic opportunity that is available in Iraq. So I certainly think there has to be much--a broader discussion about how we do that.

Mr. Coffman. Yeah. I would hope that would be something that our government would look at from your standpoint, from a diplomatic standpoint, in terms of encouraging the government. Because the fact is, it is still the vertically integrated government that we had left--that was in place, you know, prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein, where, really, all decisions are centralized out of Baghdad. I mean, there is no system of taxation at the provincial level. And so, I just think that a decentralization of authority that the Kurds now enjoy would be great for the Sunni Arabs, and I would just like that to be something that we look at.

And I would express my same concerns, having served there in 2005, 2006 for the Marine Corps, that the ranking member expressed in that this is a tough situation for the Sunni Arabs in that region, and the friction between the Shia militias that are Iranian-backed and that local population is not to be discounted. And, again, it is alienation from ever feeling that they are a part of the Iraqi Government.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The Chairman. Mr. Larsen.

Mr. Larsen. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for coming today. Initially, in your answer to your first question about the Mosul incident, you said that you are going to assess, and if necessary,

investigate. Can you help me understand that distinction from your perspective, what that means for us?

General Votel. Absolutely. So, you know, this is, unfortunately, not the first time we have had allegations of civilian casualties in CENTCOM. And so what we do have is a process in place for how we--how we have standardized process for how we look at this. When we get--it starts off with the receipt of an allegation. We get allegations from all over the place. We get it from the news. We get it from social media. We might get it from people on the street. We might get it--we may--much of it is self-reported if we see something, so we get an allegation.

What we do then is we do what we call a credibility assessment. And the intention there is to do an initial review of the facts and circumstances to merit, make a determination about whether we need to move to a more fulsome investigation.

And so what we have--in this particular--and then if we make that determination, then we move to an investigation. And so for the incident that I was talking about here in Mosul, we have taken that step. We have decided, hey, there is--as you heard General Townsend acknowledge yesterday, there might be something here. We might--there is a fair chance that we may have contributed to this, and so now we have moved to the investigation phase.

So it will be a more formalized approach to really look into the details of this as much as we can to establish what happened, establish what the facts are, identify accountability, and then certainly identify the lessons learned out of that.

Mr. Larsen. And you mentioned on the criteria that you are looking at, there is command and control, there was a few others. What were those?

General Votel. Thank you. So, you know, we will look at command and control. We will look at the intelligence that we had. This was a very dynamic situation. This wasn't a

deliberate target or anything else. This was an evolving combat situation. So we will take a look at the intelligence that was provided to us by the Iraqis that we had. We will look at the enemy's reactions here, and we will try and understand exactly their role in this. We will look at the munitions that we employed here, and we will look at the fusing options. You know, you--we do have the technology, largely supported by Congress here, to have munitions that can be very specific.

I think as you heard General Townsend say yesterday, the munition that was employed here should not have created the effects that we--that have been observed. So that causes us to look at that to see if there are other things that may have contributed to that as well.

So what we do is try to be more--very complete in the investigation. It takes a little bit of time, but we usually have a pretty good answer at the end of it.

Mr. Larsen. All right. Thanks.

I am going to switch gears here to Yemen. And could you just briefly describe the U.S. security objectives in Yemen for us?

General Votel. Well, thanks. I think there are two principal interests that we are concerned about in Yemen right now. One is that Yemen is not used as a platform or a sanctuary for attacks on the homeland. And that gets to our focus on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Al Qaeda in Yemen.

This is the franchise of Al Qaeda that has demonstrated in the past the ability to try to attack our homeland, and some of those people are still--exist there. So that is a key aspect of our interests here. And so our operations are focused on disrupting Al Qaeda there.

The other key interest that we have in this particular area is freedom of navigation. On the western coast of Yemen, between it and the Horn of Africa, is the Bab-el-Mandeb. It is an extraordinarily restrictive strait. It is a chokepoint. It is a major transit area for commerce, not only ours, but for

international ships. About 60 to 70 ships go through there a day.

What we have seen is we have seen, I believe, at the--with the support of Iran, we have seen the migration of capabilities that we previously observed in the Straits of Hormuz, a layered defense, consists of coastal defense missiles, radar systems, mines, explosive boats that have been migrated from the Straits of Hormuz to this particular area right here threatening commerce and ships and our security operations in that particular area.

Mr. Larsen. Just can you--do you assess that we will be able to stay with those objectives, and we won't be dragged into other--other people's goals?

General Votel. Well, of course, as you know, there is a civil war ongoing right there, that is playing out between a Saudi-led coalition and an Iranian-supported element. And so, there--you know, we provide some indirect support to that. Obviously, this is something we are paying very, very close attention to. While that rages, it does have--it does have some impact on our other--on our principal interests in this area, so I think we do have to pay some attention to that.

Mr. Larsen. Thank you.

The Chairman. Mr. Cook.

Mr. Cook. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It is going to--next month or so, it is going to be very intense here in Washington. Obviously, there has been a lot of talk about health care. But there is also something looming, at least in my mind, that is going to have direct implication on you, and that is the continuing resolution. That is the budget that we have got to pass to support you.

And I am going to be very candid. You don't have to answer totally. I think you can kind of see this one coming, but a number of us are very, very worried about the readiness indicators, about--we had folks in talking about maintenance. You have got a large area, a large military, and everything

else. And if we don't do this correctly, to the best--can you give us an evaluation, the impact in terms of readiness, tempo of ops, and the ability to conduct your mission?

General Votel. Thank you, Congressman. And so, first off, you know, I--the support that I get from the services is extraordinary. They give me everything that I ask for, and I have been well taken care of by that. But I share your concern on the impacts of a continuing resolution on the services and on SOCOM [Special Operations Command] that really provide the capabilities that a combatant commander like I need to have. And so, I am concerned when we are not able to pursue long-term programs and fund them and approach them over time, I am concerned with the impacts that continuing resolutions and other instruments here have had on readiness.

For example, I just--I look at the MEU/ARGs [Marine expeditionary units/amphibious ready groups] that the Marine Corps provides into my area as well as into the AFRICOM [Africa Command] and EUCOM [European Command] area. They don't come with all of the same number of helicopters that we have had in the past. I believe that is a readiness issue, and it impacts my ability to have flexibility and agility and react to things in the area. So I am very concerned about this.

And while, you know, I--the money won't necessarily come to me, it goes to the people that provide me the capabilities that I need to pursue our objectives, and so I am very concerned about this.

Mr. Cook. I want to switch gears a little bit. I am also on Foreign Affairs. And, you know, we have the issue that continually pops up about the foreign military sales, and last year, looked at the replacement for the Saudis, the number of M-1 battle tanks that they had lost. And sometimes--you have alluded to it, there was a question about Yemen and everything else and the toll that that has taken there.

Do you influence at all with the State Department foreign military sales, particularly for some of our allies that would

obviously contribute to your ability to conduct your mission?

General Votel. Congressman, we absolutely do. We do that through our security cooperation offices that are located in many of these countries, almost all of the countries that we have here. And I would share your--share your concern about this. FMF [foreign military financing] and FMS [foreign military sales] are extraordinarily important programs for us.

From my perspective as combatant commander, what I want to try to do is build capability for our partners to do the things--to provide their own security and then to be integrated with us. And I am concerned when we choose not to sell our systems, provide them to them. They will go somewhere else to get them, and they will get lesser systems. They won't get the sustainment, they won't get the training, and we won't be integrated. And it doesn't help us. So I think we have to recognize that this is an important part of our security cooperation aspect, and we can't completely define our FMF, our FMS systems as something to try to change people's behavior.

That is certainly an aspect of it, but it has got to be focused on building capability, in my mind.

Mr. Cook. Thank you, again, for your service and for your candidness. I yield back.

The Chairman. Mr. Courtney.

Mr. Courtney. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, General, for your testimony this morning. I just wonder if you could help clarify what is going on right now in terms of increased deployments in Syria. Again, this month, again, from a whole variety of news outlets, it was reported about 4- or 500 marines were deployed, new marines, new contingent of marines this month. You know, why was that decision made, and what is their mission?

General Votel. Thank you. So, Congressman, what we are constantly doing is this is an evolving campaign, and we are--you know, the enemy changes, we change, and the situation changes a lot on the ground. What we are constantly trying to

do is assess what our requirements are and how we best support our partners through our, kind of ``by, with, and through'' approach, and make sure we have the capabilities to fully enable them and to help them win. So there is a constant process of assessing what we need.

I demand that our leaders forward--General Townsend, in this particular case, provides rationale for the additional capabilities that he needs, and that we have very, very clear roles and missions for the things that we are bringing forward.

And so what we--we do have a very deliberate process. What you have seen here most recently are not things that just came up relatively quickly. These have been things that we have anticipated for some time, the--you cited, for example, the marines, and some of the artillery organizations. We have recognized that as we continue to pursue our military objectives in Syria, we are going to need more direct, all-weather fire support capability for our Syrian Democratic Force partners. And so this--that is what you are seeing. So they have deployed. They are helping us with that particular aspect. They are also helping us with some of our logistics capability in Syria.

Syria is a fairly immature area for us in terms of that, so we don't have a big infrastructure like we have in Iraq or some other places here, so we do need some help in those particular areas.

So I--what I can assure you is that there is a rationale, and there are specific roles and missions for all of these capabilities that we are bringing.

Mr. Courtney. So--well, thank you for that answer. Again, I don't actually want to second guess your sort of military judgment, but what I would--it sounds like, you know, they are starting to get much, sort of deeper involved in the fight in Raqqa. And I guess--you know, we voted a couple of years ago in this committee in defense authorization bills have been extending title 10 authorization, which, in my opinion, as

someone who supported that, it was not about troops--you know, boots on the ground, direct military involvement, but this sounds like we are sort of creeping in that direction.

General Votel. Congressman, I think what I would tell you is that we have not taken our eye off of what our principal mission is, which is advise and assist and enable--enable our partners. And, so, I think that is what you continue to see with all of these deployments right here.

We are not--we have--one of our key principles here with our folks forward is to help our partners fight but not fight for them. And so, as we continue to bring these additional capabilities in, these are things that we emphasize. So they do fit into our continuing mission of advise, assist, and enable our partners.

Mr. Courtney. Thank you.

Again, I mean, there is a larger question here about the fact that I think the authorization of use of force is long overdue for a revisit, but that is our problem, not on your side.

During the time you have been at Central Command, the carrier gap phenomenon has been occurring, again, from, I think, 2007 to 2015, we had continuous presence of carriers and air strikes against ISIS. I mean, how are you coping with that?

General Votel. Thank you for bringing it up. I think this is another example of some potentially readiness concerns here.

So the way that we do that is, what we have done is we have worked with--through our air and maritime commanders in theater. So we have, on occasion, brought in additional air force organizations to help fill in the gap in those particular cases. We just completed that with a squadron from the United States that came in and did an exceptional job for us for about 90 days. And we also look to our allies, our partners, to do this. The U.K. [United Kingdom], the French, have surged some of their ships down in this particular area to help make up for this gap as well.

So this is a constant management process for us. We expect to do this now. It has been vital to our operating here. We are always looking for ways we can kind of balance out what our requirements are with the whole joint force, whole joint and combined force that is available to us.

Mr. Courtney. Thank you.

The Chairman. Dr. Wenstrup.

Dr. Wenstrup. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for being with us today. We appreciate it very much.

You know, we perceive that we are in the process of increasing our--and/or our allies' capacity and capabilities in the fight against ISIS right now.

I am curious, what is the conduit for this committee to get some knowledge on number of personnel needed? And I don't need exact number, and I don't like when we have caps, because we end up using contractors instead of our troops, sometimes cost more. But just trying to get some understanding of what you need as far as personnel and what we need to execute the mission so that we can somewhat justify the expenditures that may be involved with that.

General Votel. Well, Congressman, I think we have a closed session right after this, and I would be happy to talk with you in great detail about the advice that I provide and what we think we--what we need and what we have talked about with our leadership.

Dr. Wenstrup. I appreciate that.

Another question is General Scaparrotti the other day mentioned something about Russia's influence in Afghanistan increasing. What is your understanding of their influence, and how does it change your efforts?

General Votel. I--it hasn't significantly altered our approach here at this particular point, but I think what they are attempting to do is they are attempting to be an influential third party here in Afghanistan. I think they are

reaching out to the Taliban, and they have made the decision under their own determination that the Government of Afghanistan and the coalition that supports them is unable to solve the concern about ISIS, and I think they are much more concerned about ISIS and the potential that has to move into the Central Asian states, and potentially have an impact on them. And so, they have created a narrative that we really have to partner more with the Taliban to address this particular threat.

And they are trying to leverage that into a bigger role in terms of, I think, trying to pursue peace agreements and other things with the Taliban.

Frankly, I don't consider it to be particularly helpful at this particular point to what we have been doing and the process that we have been using.

Dr. Wenstrup. So does that change your behavior in any way with their presence?

General Votel. I don't think it has changed our behavior. We have been working with our Afghan partners. We have been extraordinarily focused on the Islamic State as it has emerged in Afghanistan. It has, I believe, had a significant amount of success against them. We have reduced them from about 15 districts that they are operating in to about 2. We are targeting a lot of their leaders right now. We have persistent pressure on them all the time. So it has not--it has not impacted our approach.

Dr. Wenstrup. Okay. Thank you, General. I appreciate it. I yield back.

The Chairman. Ms. Tsongas.

Ms. Tsongas. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And it is good to have you with us today, General.

I appreciate very much you taking the time here. I want to thank you for your service to our Nation, as well as the remarkable women and men who are serving in some of the most contested parts in the world. We are forever grateful.

And I appreciated listening to your opening statement as well as reading your written remarks, which I think illustrate so clearly the threat posed by ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], Al Qaeda, and other affiliated groups in the region, and certainly make clear that there are no easy answers given the seriousness and complexity of the challenge to reverse ISIS' gain.

But I am also concerned about the steady buildup of U.S. forces in the region, most especially in Syria, absent a robust debate in Congress on an authorization for the use of military force, something Secretary Mattis called for last week before the Senate Armed Services Committee, and I was glad to see that.

I am concerned that additive deployment may lead to an expansive, open-ended commitment. I think you have referenced an evolving campaign, that could have long-term consequences raising substantial and unpredictable risks that haven't been fully considered or endorsed by Congress as a whole.

I am also mindful of the human toll in the countries where we are waging the fight against ISIL and how mounting civilian casualties, tragic in and of themselves, as you yourself said, can ultimately work against our long-term interest in setting the conditions for stability.

And I appreciate your redressing--addressing it in your open remarks, but I also appreciate the important work that international groups are playing in monitoring civilian casualties.

As reported in The Washington Post yesterday, quote, ``According to Airwars,' ' a group that you are familiar with, which is a British monitoring group, ``the frequency of civilian deaths alleged to be linked to U.S. strikes in Iraq and Syria has now outpaced those linked to Russia. The scrutiny has been compounded by a string of high-profile reported U.S. attacks in both countries, including assaults on a mosque, a school, and, most recently, a building apparently used as a

shelter in the Iraqi city of Mosul'' that is currently being investigated appropriately so.

These reports come alongside indications that the administration is considering relaxing the rules of engagement put in place by the Obama administration, which made a concerted effort at avoiding civilian deaths, and you have said today that there has not been such a change.

And I have read that you have said that the coalition will, quote, ``take extraordinary measures to avoid harming civilians,'' unquote.

So can you tell us how you balanced a pursuit, a very important military objective, with those extraordinary measures? And, in particular, when fighting an enemy that intentionally places civilians in harm's way, we all know that, how much risk should the U.S. and its civilian coalition partners accept in limiting air or artillery strikes where it may be difficult to confirm civilian presence, especially in Mosul, where civilians have been directed to shelter in place? So there are so many still there. It seems to be an extraordinary challenge, and I am curious as to how you are thinking this through in order to minimize civilian casualties.

General Votel. Thank you, Congresswoman, for your question there.

First off, you know, we have provided, I think, very clear and concise guidance to our commanders in the field. I think the principal way that we are addressing this is by entrusting and enabling our very well experienced and trained leaders on the ground. They are the best guard against this. We have seen that in the past. We will see it in the future here. Their judgment, their experience is the best thing to ensure with this.

As we go through this, you know, and with our on-scene commanders that are very, very close to this, I think the key thing that we do emphasize to them is we go to war with our values, we hold ourselves to a higher accountability, a higher

standard with respect to this, and, of course, we always operate in accordance with the law of armed conflict and we do everything that we can to prevent this.

And what we try to do is we try to work that through our leadership and ensure they understand the obligation that we all expect, and that as they carry out these obligations in what are extraordinary, complex, and difficult situations, that they are making the best judgments, the best decisions that they can based on the information that they have. And I will tell you that in many, many, many cases, they are making the right calls. I have visited--I visit Iraq every month and I talk to our advise and assist teams and I hear about operations that we support, but I will tell you at the same pace, I hear about operations where we choose not to strike, where we choose not to do something because it didn't look right, we couldn't confirm what was going on, we didn't have a good situational awareness.

So I think, from my perspective, we are going to trust our processes and we are going to trust our people and we are going to continue to put emphasis on that throughout the process.

Ms. Tsongas. Trust but verify your processes.

General Votel. Right.

The Chairman. Mr. Russell.

Mr. Russell. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you. It is good to see you again.

And I guess my own take on it is that we are not seeing a never-ending increase; we are recovering from a massive decrease in disengagement in the region. It has not been that many years ago, six, and because of that decrease, we now see Iraq in the throes of a civil war, Syria in the throes of a civil war, Yemen in the throes of a civil war, the complete area destabilized, making a whole number of things even harder to deal with, plus distancing to our allies in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, not to mention other coalition partners on a whole number of other affairs. And so I tend to disagree with some of

my colleagues here in that view.

With regard to collateral damage, no one cares more about civilian casualties than the United States military, no one. No one takes more pain or more effort to prevent the needless loss of life. No one has the systems in place to prevent the things that we do in our targeting systems and everything else. And we know about our own errors, because it is us who expose them, who discover them, and who try to refine them.

So before we get in a bashing of those that are in uniform and needless loss of civilian casualties or somehow suggesting that we are causing more civilian deaths than the Russians, I challenge that, I defy that, I reject that, I don't think that it reflects anything to our practices as a nation or certainly our men and women in uniform.

General Votel, you spoke of the need to use the other instruments of national power. There are a number of areas that we obviously see a need to do that, you have spoken to a lot of them, but I guess one of the most troubling things that gets the least amount of attention is Yemen. And as we would see the Gulf of Aden now slip into a possible future Hormuz Strait, there is serious implication with that. We have got 60 percent of the Yemen population now that is malnourished. We have got opportunities to do a lot of good things with President Hadi and other efforts.

The foreign military sales being crucial, the foreign engagement being crucial, if you could design it where you engage the other instruments of national power to support the coalition efforts as well as the CENTCOM efforts, what would it look like? What would you want that other engagement to be other than just the military?

General Votel. Thanks, Congressman. I think that, you know, certainly one of the things that has to be addressed, as you kind of highlighted here, is we have to resolve the civil conflict that is taking place there, right. That creates an environment that makes it extraordinarily difficult for us to

be--has made it difficult for us to be persistent in our efforts against Al Qaeda. It has caused us to break relationships we had with the Yemeni forces we developed over a course of years, and it has given rise to the threat that we have already talked about this morning in the Bab-el-Mandeb in the Red Sea, an area where we have 60 to 70 ships go through every day, not just U.S., but international ships go through there. So I think that is important.

So I think the thing that we have to continue to press on, is we have to press in our diplomatic efforts to resolve that conflict as quickly as we can. I think that will help, I think, set the table. There are perhaps some things that we can assist with on the military side to bring that forward without becoming enmeshed into a civil conflict here. We should consider those things.

I will tell you, I have talked with our ambassador there on a regular basis. He is excellent. He is extraordinarily engaged here. And I just think we have to continue to press in this particular area. And this is an area where we will need the Department of State and others to help us move through.

Mr. Russell. Do you still see a base of support? A lot of relationship has been developed for decades, and much is lost if we see the things tip toward the Houthi rebels and, as you had mentioned, Al Qaeda gaining leverage with engagement with the population and assisting in feeding them and other things. Could you speak to some of that?

General Votel. I do. And I would highlight to you that we have some very good partners in the area, certainly Saudi Arabia on the edges here, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE] have been extraordinary partners for us and they have good relationships here. So I do see the ability to reestablish some of these partnerships again.

Mr. Russell. Thank you. And thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman. Ms. Rosen.

Ms. Rosen. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, General Votel, for your very great insights today.

I want to switch back to Iran for a moment. You know, you said you believe that Iran is one of the greatest threats to the U.S. today. So if that is true and your assessment is true that their overall objective is to be the most powerful in the region, then to pursue this end, do you believe Iran has increased destabilizing activities since the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], and if they have, how should we react to these alleged activities without risking escalation and other conflicts in the region?

General Votel. Congresswoman, I do believe they have. And I believe that Iran is operating in what I call a gray zone, and it is an area between normal competition between states and just short of open conflict, and they are exploiting this area in a variety of different ways. They do it through raising surrogate forces, they do it through lethal aid facilitation, they do it through their own cyber activities, and they do it through their influence operations. And I think they are clearly focused in this particular area, and I think they have--their efforts have increased in this particular area.

I think the things that we need to do is--I think there are three broad things, and I have had an opportunity to talk to some of our regional partners about it. I think we need to look at opportunities where we can disrupt through military means or other means their activities, particularly their facilitation aspects here. I think we need to look at opportunities where we can expose and hold them accountable for the things that they are doing. That has to be done. They have to account for their destabilize--the destabilizing role that they are playing in the region right now. And, finally, I think we do have to address their revolutionary ideology, and what has to be addressed. And certainly we play a role in that, but others in the region do as well. Iran has a role in the region. There is no doubt about that.

And I want to be clear that we think differently about the people of Iran than we think about the leadership of Iran, the revolutionary council that runs Iran. In my mind, those are two very distinct things. And our concern is not with the people of Iran, but it is with their revolutionary government.

Ms. Rosen. Thank you.

And I would just like to switch a little bit to the greater geopolitical tensions in the region. Is terrorism really the most pressing threats emanating from the Middle East, and what is our best way to exert our influence, if that is true, against those threats?

General Votel. Well, Congresswoman, I think terrorism is what is being manifested out of what are really deep underlying issues that pervade this region. There are some serious sectarian issues across the region that have to be addressed. There are disenfranchised populations, there is economic disparity between governments and the people that they lead. And so these deep underlying issues in many cases still remain across the region. Those have to be addressed.

And I think the way that we see this being manifested is in violent extremism, that we see the rise of ISIS. When you go back and look at why that came up, the desire for young men and in some cases young women to join organizations like Al Qaeda or ISIS, they are looking for a job, they are looking for money, they are looking for relationships, they are looking for economic opportunity that may not exist in their local communities.

So there are deep underlying issues that have to be addressed in this region that give rise to these threats that we are focused on. So I don't want to give the impression that beating ISIS will--it will remove a threat, but it won't solve many of the underlying challenges in this particular region. That will take more work.

Ms. Rosen. So considering that we are going to be creating a bill fairly soon, where do we best put our resources to fight

this? What do you need?

General Votel. Well, I think this--Congresswoman, I think we have identified, from a military standpoint, I need to build and sustain the operations that we have ongoing in places like Iraq and Syria, and really across the region. I need to ensure that the services, that Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and SOCOM, that provide me capabilities, have the resources they need to develop the capabilities and the resiliency within their formations to continue to provide me things.

So, you know, those are the key things that I am thinking about right now in terms of the resources that I need moving forward.

Ms. Rosen. Thank you.

The Chairman. Ms. McSally.

Ms. McSally. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General Votel. Do you know how many civilians have been killed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria?

General Votel. Congresswoman, I do not know that number.

Ms. McSally. I mean, there are media reports. I would love to hear back from you on what the number is, but it is in the tens of thousands. Is that probably fair?

General Votel. I think that is fair.

Ms. McSally. Thank you. And having spent a lot of time in the targeting process both shooting 30-millimeter out of an A-10 all the way up to, you know, working at the COCOM [combatant command] level, I just want to agree with my colleagues here and with your statements that we go through great pains in our targeting cycle to make sure that we are compliant with the laws of armed conflict and that we are avoiding civilian casualties.

More for my colleagues, I want to make sure you understand what the laws of armed conflict [LOAC] are. That if we have a legitimate target, we do everything we can to minimize civilian casualties, but we are not allowed to target civilians. We never target civilians.

Is ISIS targeting civilians?

General Votel. I believe they are.

Ms. McSally. Absolutely. Is it a violation of the law of armed conflict to have human shields?

General Votel. Yes, it is.

Ms. McSally. So ISIS is violating the laws of armed conflict.

Again for my colleagues, the standard for the LOAC is that we make feasible precautions towards limiting civilian casualties while we are hitting legitimate military targets. The last administration went above and beyond this, far higher than I have ever seen before in my 26 years in the military, using near certainty that no civilians will be killed.

I agree with some retired generals, General Deptula, and most recently, General Dunlap published something a few days ago on this, that if we are not hitting legitimate military targets and allowing these terrorists to continue to live, then we are actually allowing them to continue to kill civilians. I mean, this actually enables them to continue their terrorist activities, to include exporting it to other places.

So this is what General Dunlap calls a moral hazard of inaction, of us doing nothing on legitimate targets because of this near certainty standard, from my view, actually allows the terrorists free rein to continue to kill civilians, tens of thousands.

And also, I now believe that what we are seeing in the change here is that ISIS knows that they can use human shields to avoid being hit. It is their air defense system. Additionally, it is my view that as we move closer into the urban conflict into Mosul and they are using human shields, civilian casualties are going to go up. This is a horrible element of war, that ISIS started this war.

So do you agree that some of the high level of, I think, ridiculous standard that we had previously has now created this behavior by ISIS, that they now realize if they take human

shields, they are going to avoid being struck, and that actually this is adding to the problem?

General Votel. Congresswoman, I do believe they understand our sensitivity to civilian casualties and they are exploiting that, and I do agree that as we move into these urban environments, it is going to become more and more difficult to apply extraordinarily high standards for the things that we are doing, although we will try.

Ms. McSally. Great. Thank you.

Again, I look forward to continuing to talk with you in the classified realm, but, look, this whole line of thinking that somehow because we are engaging the enemy and, unfortunately, again, the investigation is ongoing on this latest attack, somehow it is our fault that as we are engaging the enemy, that perhaps civilians are being killed either by mistake or because the enemy is using a tactic that actually has them become part of the target. That is on them, not on us.

And if we then move back further and allow more terrorists to live to fight another day because of this narrative, then we are going to actually open up more civilians to be killed by these terrorists. Is that a fair line of thinking?

General Votel. I share your concern, Congresswoman.

Ms. McSally. Great. Thank you.

I also want to ask, and maybe this is more for the classified setting, when we are identifying combatants and noncombatants, this used be a pet peeve of mine, sometimes I would be in VTCs [video teleconferences] where we were getting ready to schwack some bad guys in Somalia, and I would hear the terminology of whether there is women and children versus men. There are combatants and noncombatants. And what we saw in Yemen is we had a bunch of women that were actually shooting at our troops. That has been reported in the media.

So can you confirm with me that we are still using the terms in our analysis of combatants and noncombatants, and we are not making assumptions that just because you are a woman,

you are not a combatant? That is not the law of armed conflict.

General Votel. We do think of it as that and look at it that way.

Ms. McSally. Okay. Great. Thank you. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

The Chairman. Mr. Langevin.

Mr. Langevin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. General Votel, welcome back before the committee. I want to thank you for your testimony, but most especially for your service and the men and women who serve under you. We are grateful for all you do to defend the Nation.

As our cyber capabilities are maturing, particularly with U.S. Cyber Command now being stood up and the training and deploying of our cyber mission teams, can you please discuss with us your views on the impact of our cyber operations against ISIL, how effective they have been and what more can be done to enhance them?

General Votel. Thank you, Congressman.

And I look forward to an opportunity to talk about this in a classified setting as well, but what I can tell you here is that I think, with the great support of Admiral Rogers and the team at Cyber Command [CYBERCOM], we have forged a very close relationship between CENTCOM, Cyber Command and their subordinate elements, and I would throw SOCOM in there as well, that has allowed us to use this capability to have effects against this particular enemy. And I do think we are starting from an area where we didn't have much experience in this. We are actually creating effects on the ground.

I would share with you that this is an extraordinarily, extraordinarily savvy enemy, and so they have capabilities in this area, and we will need to continue to evolve in this. I would also add that some of our partners, some of our coalition partners have unique capabilities in this area, and they have been well integrated into this as well. So I do think we are beginning to have good effects with this, but there certainly

is more that we need to do.

Mr. Langevin. Good. And I look forward to following up and getting some more details when we get into the classified session.

Let me ask you this. In your opinion, is the current joint task force areas command and control construct effective, efficient, synchronized, and deconflicted with other operations taking place in the CENTCOM area of responsibility? And, also, how would you characterize support and integration with teams from U.S. CYBERCOM?

General Votel. I think they are excellent in both cases. In fact, when we recently hosted a congressional delegation down at CENTCOM to talk about things we are doing, we actually invited JTF [joint task force] areas to come in and be part of that because we consider them to be that close of a team member.

So I think the integration has been exceptional with JTF areas, and the leadership there at Cyber Command and in that particular organization have been extraordinarily well engaged with us.

Mr. Langevin. Thank you.

Another topic. We obviously rely heavily on special operations forces [SOF] for operations around the globe. The authorities and capabilities of SOCOM allow us, obviously, to keep the footprint small and carry out unique activities. However, that utility may have led to an overreliance on SOF.

As the former SOCOM commander and current CENTCOM commander, what are your concerns in this regard? And what actions can we take to decrease the high demand for SOF around the globe, such as increasing conventional forces training capability?

General Votel. Well, as the former SOCOM commander, obviously, you know, we wanted to do everything we could to support the other combatant commanders here. And, you know, General Thomas and I have, I think, a very strong relationship,

we talk frequently, and I think we have been able to figure out ways that we can manage the force moving forward here. So I do support the--you know, obviously the very continued support of them.

I will tell you, one of the things that does concern me a little bit about SOCOM and some of the very unique capabilities that they have is that many of them are heavily leveraged in OCO [Overseas Contingency Operations budget line]. Some of the very unique capabilities, and, again, we can talk about this in a classified session, are very heavily leveraged in OCO, and that concerns me about the sustainability.

It concerned me as the SOCOM commander and now concerns me as the CENTCOM commander, who are very dependent on that. I am very concerned about that. I think we need to stabilize that and I think we need to make the commitment to give SOCOM the things they need to serve the Nation.

Beyond that, Congressman, I would tell you one of the things I am most proud of being the SOCOM commander--or being the CENTCOM commander is the very close relationship between our SOF forces and our conventional forces. It is almost indistinguishable how they are able to operate, and that comes for a variety of reasons; certainly our experience over the last 15 or 16 years working together and the fact that a lot of our leaders know each other, not just professionally.

But personally, but I want to assure the committee and I want to assure the American people that we are fighting the enemy together, we are not fighting each other here, and that was not always the case in the military, but I am very pleased with how our conventional and SOF forces are working very, very closely together, with our interagency partners as well.

Mr. Langevin. Very good, General. Well, as a former SOCOM commander, I have great confidence that you are going to balance that force just right and you are in a unique position. So thank you for you are doing, and I look forward to the classified session.

I yield back.

The Chairman. Mr. Bacon.

Mr. Bacon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to thank General Votel for your leadership, and your team. So many challenging problems in your AOR [area of responsibility], and it is not just one, two, three, it is just hard. So I know you and your team work very hard at that, and we appreciate it.

I associate with the comments too of some of our colleagues here that say that we need to get a congressional authorization for force. I think we do. I think what we did in 2001 and 2003 are applicable and I feel like we have got to work towards that in Congress.

And I also want to say that I agree with your comments on Iran. I think you are right on target. My fourth deployment there, I think, when I was in there 2007 and 2008, I believe roughly half of our service men and women were killed due to actions from Iran with the explosive—or the EFPs [explosively formed penetrators] and the very support they were giving to the Shia militias, and I dare say it would probably be about a thousand of our service men and women over time were killed due to the Iranian actions.

My question to you today is, we can do kinetic operations indefinitely with ISIS or Al Qaeda, but I don't think in the end that wins the fight. How do you see a grand strategy, or how do you see our grand strategy to defeat these enemies? It has got to be—we have got to go after their ideology, their financing, their recruiting. Do you think we have the right strategy?

General Votel. I do, Congressman. I think we do have the outline of a good strategy to address the things that you are highlighting here. As you are aware, one of the first things that the new administration did was direct the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State to come up with a plan to address and defeat ISIS more completely. And I think the

acknowledgement that that is both the Department of Defense, Department of State, and many others in the government here, I think, is an acknowledgement that we need--that we do need to do that. We certainly need to go after their finances, we need to go after where they are physically, we need to go after the conditions that give rise to these particular organizations.

But I would also add that we need to go after this ideology. And there are things that we can do, but there are certainly things that our partners in the region can do. There are just some things that as a western country, as the United States, will not resonate as fully as it will from people in the region with respect to that.

So the ideology, in my view, is very, very important. And then getting after the underlying issues that we talked about here, I think, is ultimately what we really have to focus on.

Mr. Bacon. One follow-on. In 2007 and 2008, we had great success largely because the Sunni tribes came over and started helping us against the fight--against Al Qaeda. I think on a grander level, we need to have that Sunni help, like you are alluding to, but our agreement with Iran, I believe, undermined the trust of many of the Sunni countries, I have heard that from some of our Sunni friends, because I think they fear Iran just as much as they do ISIS in many cases.

Have you seen that same trend when you have talked to our Sunni friends? Is there concerns with what we did the past 2 years, 3 years with Iran, and have you seen that undermine that ability to work with our Sunni friends?

General Votel. Truthfully, Congressman, I have. I have had Sunni leaders and other Arab leaders tell me that same thing. And so I know there certainly is a perception out there about that, and as you know, oftentimes perception is truth in many quarters here.

So that is why I think one of the key things that we have continued to emphasize with our people and with our leadership is the importance of building and rebuilding trust with our

partners in the region. These are difficult situations here. And they are not all perfect, but we have to--I think it is better to be engaged with them and to be their confirmed partner.

And, frankly, the impression I get when I talk to all of our partners in the region is they do prefer the United States. They want to have a relationship with us. And so I think we ought to look at ways that we can take advantage of that moving forward.

Mr. Bacon. Thank you very much. And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The Chairman. Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. Lamborn. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, General, thank you for the job that you are doing. And I am so glad you are there now, especially given your past track record.

When it comes to Yemen, I am really glad that we are taking steps now to support our allies in the area and our friends in the area. When I have talked to people from the Emirates, for instance, their concern isn't ISIS, I mean, that is a concern, but they are concerned about Yemen and the Iranian proxy war that is going on there.

How do you evaluate what is going on in Yemen? I know we had a tragic loss of life with the recent raid, and that was regrettable, but I think it is very important that we are supporting Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, and I think it is overdue that we are doing that. What are your perspectives on Yemen?

General Votel. Well, Congressman, you know, as I mentioned a little bit earlier, I mean, I think there are some vital U.S. interests that are at stake here. Certainly we don't want Yemen to be used as a platform for attacks in our homeland or against our allies or partners around the globe or in the region, and so we have to--we have to be focused on that.

I am extraordinarily concerned about another contested

maritime chokepoint in the region. And so that directly impacts our national interests, the freedom of navigation, freedom of commerce, and supports our global economic objectives here, and so I think we have to be very, very concerned about that. So I do think there are some vital aspects of that. All of that is against the backdrop of this civil war that you talked about here.

And, you know, certainly we all understand the implications of becoming involved in those types of activities. And if we don't choose to do it militarily, then we have to look at ways that we can try to move forward and try to resolve that situation. I do believe that as long as that continues to boil, that it will impact the ability for us to really focus on other principal interests that we have in that part of the world.

Mr. Lamborn. Well, and obviously everyone wants peace in the area and the fighting to stop, but until that happens, I think we have to take the side of our friends and allies, and they are so concerned that Iran is using the Houthi rebels as a proxy to destabilize and ultimately come after them. That is their perspective.

And while I don't think we need to consider any kind of boots on the ground or anything like that, I think as much as we can do with ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] and things like that to support our friends and allies is critical. If you want to better address this in the closed section of the hearing, tell me that, but is there more that we can be doing?

General Votel. Yeah, there is. And I think this would be a really good topic in a closed session, Congressman.

Mr. Lamborn. Okay. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.
The Chairman. Mr. Gallagher.

Mr. Gallagher. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, General, for being here.

A quick follow-up on Yemen. To what extent has the ongoing fighting there enhanced or undermined AQAP's [Al Qaeda in the

Arabian Peninsula's] power and reach? And do you envision a long-term presence for the Emirates and the Saudis in Yemen, and if so, do their long-term objectives in Yemen align with our own?

General Votel. Well, I think we had--you know, before the civil war started, it was my estimate that we had a very good focus on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The civil war changed our posture there. And in the--underneath the ongoing civil war right there, I do believe Al Qaeda had an opportunity to prosper and to become stronger and to be resilient and continue to pursue their objectives.

So what you have seen us do here most recently is renew our focus on that. And we are doing that with a variety of our partners in the region, the UAE and Saudi Arabia certainly among the principal partners that we are working with with respect to that.

With respect to their long-term presence, that is probably a better question for them. I don't know. I don't have any insight into what their strategic calculations might be there, but, you know, I think, as we see in most of these areas, a long-term commitment is usually necessary to really change conditions.

Mr. Gallagher. Sure. In Syria, Russia has seemingly doubled down on a long-term commitment going back to the 1950s with its client state there. It seems to me that Russia and Iran are in a tactical alliance in Syria, they sort of share the same organs, Russia provides air power, the Iranians, particularly through Hezbollah, provide a lot of the ground forces. Do you see evidence of a broader regional alliance between Russia and Iran, and if so, what are its manifestations?

General Votel. Well, I think there perhaps could be. I am not sure I see specific indications of that in other areas, but certainly they are cooperating together. I think the implications of this are things that we have seen. We have seen Russian jets operating out of Iranian bases. And certainly

their cooperation together to prop up the regime and give them new life here is certainly an implication of that relationship right there.

So I am very, very--I am concerned about that. I think we should be concerned about it. I don't know that we have great insight into what their--what the Russian long-term perspective is on that relationship.

Mr. Gallagher. I too am concerned. I think the rise of the Russian-Iranian axis has been the biggest development in the region the last couple of years related to the Iran deal.

One strange bit of continuity in the region has been a return in Egypt to some form of authoritarianism. Can you comment--and it has caused a great debate within foreign policy circles within the left and the right.

Can you comment on whether you are getting the cooperation you need from a military perspective from the Sisi government in Egypt?

General Votel. I think Egypt is an extraordinarily important partner to us. We kind of consider them to be the gateway into the region. They have had historical long-term relationships there. They are an extraordinarily important country to them. They have been very helpful in the Sinai, helping address threats to the multinational force there. They were particularly responsive to our request for assistance there. And they have been very, very good--very, very good partners there. And, you know, while we have had perhaps some differences politically with them, one of the things we have been able to maintain, I think, is a good military-to-military contact.

And I think--and from a CENTCOM commander standpoint, I look forward to continuing to build on that as we move forward. I think it is a vital relationship for us.

Mr. Gallagher. So would it be fair to say, General, that from your perspective, the FMF program and the broader relationship we have with Egypt is achieving its objectives?

General Votel. Well, I don't know, because right now we do see some instances where countries like Egypt and others are reaching out and buying their military hardware from other countries.

So, again, I think this kind of goes back to the discussion we had earlier about FMF. I think our FMS program accomplishes a lot of purposes out there. One of the principal ones, from my perspective as the CENTCOM commander, is building capability with our partners, especially capability that can be integrated with our capabilities so that we can operate together.

When we choose not to allow them to buy our systems or to buy--they will look other places for this. This doesn't necessarily help them, because they get lesser systems, they don't get the sustainment, they don't always get the training with that, they are stuck with stuff that they can't fully use, and it is not integrated with us.

And so I think FMF and FMS are extraordinarily important programs that fit into our security equation across the region.

Mr. Gallagher. Thank you, General. I am out of time, but--and I know it is something that adds to your AOR, but maybe afterwards, we could talk about to what extent our involvement with the YPG [Kurdish People's Defense Unit] in Syria has affected our relationship with Turkey and sort of, more broadly, how our relationship with Turkey affects your efforts.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield.

The Chairman. General, I will just add two points on the FMF discussion.

Number one, all our allies--I would say virtually all, if not all, our allies are very frustrated with the process.

So you talked about decisions, absolutely, that is one thing, but then the process being so sluggish, even if we ultimately decide that it is in our interest to sell or provide equipment, has even--even then it is a subject of frustration.

So our Oversight and Investigation Subcommittee is looking into this issue from our standpoint. I am hopeful that a number

of members, who are also on the Foreign Affairs Committee, will look at it from the State Department standpoint, because I think one of your early points was reestablishing trust, and this is an important thing to reestablish trust.

Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Wilson. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, General Votel, it is a great honor to be with you. Every time I am with you, it is just so reassuring. And I am also so grateful for the American people to hear your service. I appreciate it as a Member of Congress, and also I appreciate it as a fellow veteran, but I particularly appreciate your service as a military dad. I always like to recognize your service has meant so much to our family.

My oldest son served for a year, field artillery, in Iraq; my second son was a Navy doctor serving with the Rangers and the SEALs in Iraq; my third son, a signal officer, served in Egypt; and I am grateful that our youngest son was an engineer in Afghanistan. And so we certainly cover the CENTCOM area of jurisdiction, and at all times we appreciate your leadership. And I give credit to my wife for training these guys. But thank you.

As the Iraqi Security Forces continue to make progress toward liberating Mosul, what is the latest on the operation and what have been the keys to the Iraqi army's success?

General Votel. Thank you, Congressman. And let me just say on behalf of CENTCOM, we appreciate all the contributions of Team Wilson there and we are very, very grateful for it.

Turning to Mosul, the Iraqi Security Forces are making, I think, good progress. This has been an extraordinarily challenging fight. It took them about 100 days to secure the eastern side of the city. They did that at a cost of 490 killed and just about over 3,000 wounded. So it is an extraordinary price that they paid for that. They very quickly were able to get themselves focused on the western part of the city. And they are now engaged in what we are seeing as a very, very

difficult fight there.

Some of their elements are engaged in what is known as the old city here, a very dense urban area, much, much more complex and much more favors the defender than it does the attacker, and so they have got their hands full as they are doing this.

I would just note that the Iraqi Security Forces just so far in about 37 days have sustained about 284 killed and a little over 1,600 wounded in the western part of the city.

The keys to success here have been, I think, the very close relationship they had with both U.S. and coalition advise and assist teams, and the ability for the Iraqi Security Forces to come together. As you know, institutionally they have got some challenges here. They have got federal police that answer to the ministry of interior, they have got Iraqi army that answers to the ministry of defense, and they have got counterterrorism forces that answer to the counterterrorism directorate, and so these are all separate ministries.

But what they have been able to do successfully is get a common commander in place among all of those different pillars of security here, who really performs a very good integrating fashion, and so they are operating much better in conjunction and in synchronization with each other, and I think that has really paid off in what has been a very, very difficult, and will continue to be a very difficult fight in the weeks and perhaps months ahead.

Mr. Wilson. Well, it is so important. And the American people need to know the city is over a million persons, it is the second largest city in the country of Iraq, and how important it is that it be liberated, and the subjugation and oppression that the people must have faced in the last year, 2 years.

And it was so encouraging for all of us last week on the Foreign Affairs Committee to have the opportunity to be with Prime Minister Abadi. I had met him in Baghdad last month, and it is just so impressive. And also the minister of defense,

Hiyali, again, it is just--that country, I think, has very positive leadership for you to work with.

Additionally, you testified about Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict and that it has negatively impacted the balance of power. What is the latest on Russia's intrusion into Syria?

General Votel. Well, as you know, they have been focused on--I think, mostly focused on helping the regime accomplish some of their objectives in the western part of the country, and they, I think, have been successful at that.

I think Russia has achieved probably many of the objectives that they set out to pursue as they got in there. They have got a government that is favorable to them, access to ports, access to airfields, influence in the region, so I think they have accomplished that.

They have, I think, begun to--they are continuing to support regime forces now in this case as they fight ISIS. So to the extent that they are doing that, that is, I would admit, helpful to what we are doing.

I would share with you, Congressman, that we do share a very congested airspace with the Russians. We have a deconfliction mechanism in place. It is generally a very professional interchange. We talk with them very frequently to coordinate--not to coordinate, but to deconflict our operations in what is a very compressed airspace over northern Syria. That generally goes pretty well.

We are looking to make that a little bit more robust to ensure that we continue our freedom of action here as we continue to pursue the campaign.

Mr. Wilson. Thank you very much.

The Chairman. General, thank you.

As you can tell, members are interested in some further discussions in a classified session, which will start in just a few moments upstairs, but for now, this hearing stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:41 a.m., the committee was adjourned.]

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A P P E N D I X

March 29, 2017

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PREPARED STATEMENTS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

March 29, 2017

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[GRAPHIC(S) NOT AVAILABLE IN TIFF FORMAT]

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QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS POST HEARING

March 29, 2017

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QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY MS. STEFANIK

Ms. Stefanik. In terms of information operations and counter ISIL propaganda efforts—we have seen some tactical success in I Syria, but I am concerned with about what I perceive to be a lar strategic gap across our government. Can you talk about ways to CENTCOM information operations requirements, and how we can impr ability to counter ISIL's global and strategic propaganda effort the State Department's Global Engagement Center the right place to interface for these types of efforts as we try to counter ISI state-sponsored actors, and if so, how can we strengthen that relationship? Are you seeing any troubling propaganda efforts wi your AOR from state-sponsored actors such as Russia, and if so h you dealing with this?

General Votel. USCENTCOM is part of a much larger effort whi includes not only USG departments and agencies, but the governme our Coalition partners, non-government organizations, and variou entities from the private sector. If we are serious about defeat ISIS in the information environment, we must match ISIS' level c intensity, volume and effectiveness in the information environme

must do the same in response to all adversaries choosing to compete in the information battlespace. The State Department's Global Engagement Center provides a very effective functional mechanism through which we can mass the effects necessary to counter and ultimately defeat adversaries. As the Global Engagement Center continues to mature its capabilities, USCENTCOM will work through the Joint Staff and OSD to help expand and improve coordination across the Department of Defense and the other Interagency. Russia and Iran both are using information operations (e.g., propaganda) to achieve their desired effects in the USCENTCOM AOR. Both have established large, well-resourced information war capabilities. Within our authorities and resources, USCENTCOM counters this propaganda. CENTCOM WebOps specifically counters allegations of U.S. assistance to ISIS and exposes Russian and Iranian violations of the Laws of Armed Conflict, among other activities.

Ms. Stefanik. Can you provide us with more of your thoughts on concerns about Russian influence within your AOR, beyond what is going on in Syria? There have been recent reports about Russian collaboration with the Taliban, and Russia increasing their presence and influence in Egypt, as just two examples.

General Votel. [The information provided is classified and restricted in the committee files.]

Ms. Stefanik. Describe the threat posed by Al Qaeda, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, and the Haqqani network. What, if any, limitations exist on your ability to effectively target these threats?

General Votel. [The information provided is classified and restricted in the committee files.]

Ms. Stefanik. According to some news reports, Iran has supported the Houthi militia in Yemen. Other reports suggested that there is a strong link between the two. What is your assessment of the nature of Iranian support to the Houthis in Yemen? How does this impact our strategy? Can we achieve our objectives in Yemen absent a political solution?

General Votel. [The information provided is classified and restricted in the committee files.]

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY DR. ABRAHAM

Dr. Abraham. Can you discuss the long-term threat Hezbollah presents to U.S. interests, and apart from increased sanctions, Congress further help in the fight against Hezbollah?

General Votel. [The information provided is classified and r in the committee files.]

Dr. Abraham. With regard to Turkey: With last year's coup at and the potential for political instability ahead of this year's presidential referendum, what are some of the challenges you have and expect to face with U.S. and coalition air support for CENTCOM missions flying out of Incirlik Air Base?

General Votel. [The information provided is classified and r in the committee files.]

Stenographic Transcript
Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
UNITED STATES EUROPEAN COMMAND

Thursday, March 23, 2017

Washington, D.C.

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1 HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
2 UNITED STATES EUROPEAN COMMAND

3
4 Thursday, March 23, 2017

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6 U.S. Senate
7 Committee on Armed Services
8 Washington, D.C.
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10 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:34 a.m. in
11 Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John
12 McCain, chairman of the committee, presiding.

13 Committee Members Present: Senators McCain
14 [presiding], Inhofe, Wicker, Fischer, Rounds, Ernst, Tillis,
15 Sullivan, Cruz, Sasse, Reed, Nelson, McCaskill, Shaheen,
16 Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Donnelly, Hirono, Kaine, King,
17 Heinrich, Warren, and Peters.

1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN MCCAIN, U.S. SENATOR
2 FROM ARIZONA

3 Chairman McCain: Well, good morning.

4 The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning
5 to receive testimony on the posture of U.S. European
6 Command. I would like to welcome General Scaparrotti, who
7 is back before the committee. I am sure he has been eagerly
8 awaiting that opportunity. We thank you for your decades of
9 distinguished service and for your leadership of our men and
10 women in uniform.

11 This morning, our thoughts and prayers are with the
12 loved ones of the four innocent people killed and dozens
13 more injured in an attack in the heart of London that police
14 believe was inspired by radical Islamist terrorists. We
15 stands in solidarity with the British people, committed as
16 ever to our special relationship and to the common defense
17 of our security and our values.

18 3 years ago this last week, Russia violated Ukrainian
19 sovereignty and annexed Crimea, a seminal event that
20 revealed what had already been increasingly obvious for
21 years: that the United States and our European allies
22 confront an aggressive, militarily capable Russian
23 Government that is hostile to our interests and our values
24 and willing to use force not as a last resort but as a
25 primary tool to achieve its revisionist objectives. Many

1 believe this challenge had been consigned to the history
2 books. And indeed, the United States operated under that
3 assumption for far too long, drastically reducing our
4 military presence, allowing our intelligence capabilities to
5 wither, and unilaterally disengaging from the information
6 fight.

7 I might add that yesterday we received information that
8 Sergei Magnitsky who was murdered by Vladimir Putin's thugs-
9 - his lawyer was thrown from a fourth floor room. I mean,
10 this kind of stuff you cannot make up. And it is an
11 indication of Vladimir Putin's feeling of impunity that he
12 can go around killing people without any penalty to pay.
13 And I am sure that what Mr. Putin was trying to do is send a
14 message to anybody else in Russia who wants to stand up
15 against him. I digress.

16 3 years later, I regret to say the United States still
17 has not adjusted to the scope, scale, and severity of the
18 new strategic reality we face in Europe. We continue to
19 lack coherent policy and strategy to deter conflict and
20 prevent aggression in Europe. Despite important progress
21 made through the European Deterrence Initiative, we still
22 have no long-term vision for U.S. force posture in Europe,
23 one that accounts for Russia's rapid military modernization,
24 evolving nuclear doctrine, violations of the INF Treaty,
25 advanced anti-access/area denial threat concentrated in

1 Kaliningrad, and significant military buildup along its
2 western border.

3 Indeed, as General Scaparrotti points out in his
4 written testimony -- and I quote -- the ground force
5 permanently assigned to EUCOM is inadequate to meet the
6 combatant command's directed mission to deter Russia from
7 further aggression.

8 The new administration has an opportunity to turn the
9 page and design a new policy and strategy in Europe backed
10 by all elements of American power and decisive political
11 will. General Scaparrotti, we hope you can help this
12 committee begin to think through the basic requirements for
13 such a policy and strategy and what resources and authority
14 you need both as European Commander and Supreme Allied
15 Commander, Europe to deter and, if necessary, defeat
16 aggression against the United States and our allies.

17 Some of the features of a new approach in Europe are
18 already clear. For example, the need to enhance the forward
19 presence of U.S. military forces and provide defensive
20 lethal assistance to Ukraine. But we still have a lot of
21 work to do in other areas, particularly in countering
22 Russian disinformation and devising gray zone strategies for
23 competition below the threshold of major conflict.

24 What is also clear is that no U.S. policy or strategy
25 in Europe can be successful without our NATO allies. At the

1 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, the leaders of every NATO ally
2 pledged to reach the goal of spending 2 percent of their GDP
3 on defense by 2024. The good news is that according to NATO
4 Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, defense budgets across
5 Europe and Canada increased by 3.8 percent last year, or by
6 some \$10 billion.

7 This is important progress, but we must be careful not
8 to reduce the NATO alliance of the notion of burden sharing
9 to simply 2 percent. Our allies do not just need to spend
10 more, they need to spend better. One senior European
11 official recently said that Europe spends roughly 50 percent
12 of the United States on defense, but produces just 15
13 percent of the capability because defense purchases are
14 uncoordinated, duplicative, and inefficient. That is why
15 enhancing European security is not just a job for NATO but
16 also for the European Union, which has an important role to
17 play in encouraging cooperative defense acquisition and
18 operation of modernized defense equipment.

19 Finally, we must never forget that the essential
20 contributions America's allies make to our national security
21 are not measured in dollars alone. After the September 11th
22 attacks killed 2,600 Americans and 135 citizens of NATO
23 countries, for the first time in history, our NATO allies
24 invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. NATO troops
25 went to fight side by side with American troops in

1 Afghanistan, and over 1,000 of them made the ultimate
2 sacrifice.

3 The price our NATO allies paid in blood fighting
4 alongside us should never be diminished. And we must never
5 forget that America is safer and more secure because it has
6 allies that are willing to step up and share the burden of
7 collective security.

8 Senator Reed?

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1 STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE
2 ISLAND

3 Senator Reed: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman,
4 for holding this timely and important hearing.

5 And I join you in solidarity with our British allies
6 and applaud your comments.

7 Thanks also to General Scaparrotti for your nearly 40
8 years of service in the military, your leadership in
9 Afghanistan, Korea, and now at U.S. European Command. Also,
10 please pass along our sincere gratitude for the outstanding
11 service of all the men and women who serve with you in
12 EUCOM. Thank you, General.

13 The transatlantic relationship is a cornerstone of U.S.
14 national security and the international order established at
15 the end of World War II. Our European allies and partners
16 have stood with us in maintaining the peace, including in
17 coalition operations in Afghanistan and fighting terrorist
18 extremists in Iraq and Syria. The NATO alliance remains
19 strong and is grounded in a shared vision of an integrated
20 and stable Europe rooted in respect for sovereignty and
21 political and economic freedom.

22 I am concerned, however, about the mixed signals that
23 the current administration seems to be sending regarding the
24 U.S. commitment to NATO and the willingness to cut a deal
25 with Russia. Secretary Tillerson's reported decision to

1 skip a NATO foreign ministers meeting next month and take a
2 trip to Moscow prior to a NATO summit in May has raised
3 concerns in some European capitals. I urge Secretary
4 Tillerson to reconsider his attendance at NATO next month
5 and send a strong signal of our unwavering support for the
6 alliance.

7 The broad and growing challenges facing the EUCOM
8 Commander mean that alliance unity is more important than
9 ever. The cohesion of NATO is being directly threatened by
10 Russia. President Putin has repeatedly shown he will use
11 military force to assert a Russian sphere of influence over
12 its neighbors and to undermine their further integration
13 into Europe. Nowhere is this more evident than in Ukraine
14 where Russia has used hybrid warfare tactics to seize Crimea
15 and continues to support militarily and financially Russian-
16 led separatists in eastern Ukraine, in violation of Russia's
17 commitments under the Minsk agreements. As we heard at
18 Tuesday's panel of distinguished former government
19 officials, it is critically important that we assist Ukraine
20 in resisting Russian pressure and instituting democratic
21 reforms. A successful, reformed Ukraine would provide a
22 powerful alternative to Putin's autocratic rule.

23 The United States has taken significant steps in recent
24 years to rebuild its military presence in Europe and
25 reassure our allies and partners threatened by renewed

1 Russian aggression. The European Deterrence Initiative, or
2 EDI, and the NATO enhanced forward presence have increased
3 the rotational presence of forces in Eastern Europe. In
4 addition, while many NATO members to fall short of the 2
5 percent of GDP target for defense spending, defense budgets
6 among NATO nations are increasing and a number of allies are
7 making significant in-kind contributions as well. Questions
8 remain, however, whether we have the appropriate mix of
9 forces in Europe, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and
10 I hope you will address these questions this morning.

11 Russia is deploying the full array of tools in the
12 Kremlin playbook to challenge the West. This includes
13 aggressive actions in the nuclear realm. I agree with the
14 experts on Tuesday's panel regarding the importance of
15 responding strongly to Russia's fielding of a missile system
16 in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces, or
17 INF, Treaty. In addition, Russia's nuclear doctrine of
18 escalate to deescalate is not only deeply disturbing but
19 potentially catastrophic.

20 Also disconcerting is Russia's increasing boldness in
21 using non-military tools to target Western democracies and
22 advance Putin's strategic aims. Russia is employing an
23 array of covert and overt asymmetric weapons in the gray
24 zone short of military conflict, including cyber hacking,
25 disinformation, propaganda, economic leverage, corruption,

1 and even political assassination. To counter this insidious
2 Russian interference, we must begin by recognizing it as a
3 national security threat. Further, the intelligence
4 community has warned that the kinds of Kremlin-directed
5 malign activities witnessed in last year's U.S. presidential
6 election are likely to re-occur in the future, including
7 during elections in France, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe
8 this year. Responding to this national security threat will
9 require a whole-of-government approach and a comprehensive
10 strategy for pushing back against Russia broadly.

11 EUCOM faces a number of other challenges as well. This
12 includes increasing instability in the Balkans where Russian
13 influence operations are feeding Serbian resentments both in
14 Serbia and among Bosnian Serbs. In addition, in the
15 Balkans, where traditionally a moderate form of Islam has
16 been practiced, there are growing Islamic Salafist
17 influences as a result of a mosque-building campaign funded
18 by Saudi Arabia. On its southeastern border, EUCOM must
19 contend with the instability arising from Syria and the
20 transnational threats emanating from that conflict. And to
21 the south, the migration crisis in the Mediterranean
22 countries continues to strain European resources for
23 security. General, I am interested in hearing how NATO is
24 handling these myriad of problems and how the United States
25 can be helpful.

1 Again, I want to thank General Scaparrotti for his
2 service and I look forward to this morning to his testimony.

3 Chairman McCain: Good morning, General.

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1 STATEMENT OF GENERAL CURTIS M. SCAPARROTTI, USA,
2 COMMANDER, U.S. EUROPEAN COMMAND/SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER,
3 EUROPE

4 General Scaparrotti: Chairman McCain, Ranking Member
5 Reed, and distinguished members of the committee, I am
6 honored to testify today as the Commander of the United
7 States European Command. On behalf of over 60,000
8 permanently assigned service members, as well as civilians,
9 contractors, and their families who serve and represent our
10 Nation in Europe, thank you for your support.

11 Before starting, I would like to also express my
12 condolence on behalf of the entire European Command team for
13 the civilians and policemen killed and wounded in
14 yesterday's terrorist attack in the UK. Our thoughts and
15 prayers go out to these victims and their families impacted
16 by this senseless attack. We strongly condemn this attack
17 and will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with our
18 NATO ally and our partners to defeat terrorism.

19 Chairman, the European theater remains critical to our
20 national interests. The transatlantic alliance gives us a
21 unique advantage over our adversaries, a united, capable
22 warfighting alliance resolved in its purpose and
23 strengthened by shared values that have been forged in
24 battle. EUCOM's relationship with NATO and the 51 countries
25 within our AOR provides the United States with a network of

1 willing partners who support global operations and secure
2 international rules-based order. Our security architecture
3 protects more than 1 billion people and has safeguarded
4 transatlantic trade which now constitutes almost half of the
5 world's GDP.

6 However, this security architecture is being tested,
7 and today we face the most dynamic European strategic
8 environment in recent history. Political volatility and
9 economic uncertainty are compounded by threats to our
10 security system that are trans-regional, multi-domain, and
11 multi-functional. In the east, a resurgent Russia has
12 turned from partner to antagonist as it seeks to reemerge as
13 a global power. Countries along Russia's periphery,
14 including Ukraine and Georgia, struggled against Moscow's
15 malign activities and military actions. In the southeast,
16 strategic drivers of instability converge on key allies,
17 especially Turkey, which has to simultaneously manage
18 Russia, terrorists, and refugee flows. In the south,
19 violent extremists and transnational criminal elements spawn
20 terror and corruption from North Africa to the Middle East,
21 while refugees flee to Europe in search of security and
22 opportunity. And in the high north, Russia is reasserting
23 its military presence and positioning itself for strategic
24 advantage in the Arctic.

25 In response to these challenges, EUCOM has shifted its

1 focus from security cooperation and engagement to deterrence
2 and defense. Accordingly, we are adjusting our posture, our
3 plans, our readiness so that we remain relevant to the
4 threats we face. In short, we are returning to the historic
5 role as a warfighting command focused on deterrence and
6 defense.

7 EUCOM's transition would not be possible without the
8 congressional support of the European Deterrence Initiative.
9 Thanks in large measure to ERI, or EDI, over the last 12
10 months, EUCOM has made clear progress with an enhanced
11 forward presence or force presence, complex exercises and
12 training, infrastructure improvements, increased
13 prepositioning of equipment and supplies, and partner
14 capacity building throughout Europe.

15 But we cannot meet these challenges alone. In response
16 to Russian aggression, EUCOM has continued to strengthen our
17 relationship with strategic allies and partners, including
18 the Baltic nations, Poland, Turkey, and Ukraine. EUCOM has
19 also strengthened ties with Israel, one of our closest
20 allies. Above all, EUCOM has supported the NATO alliance
21 which remains, as Secretary Mattis said, the bedrock of our
22 transatlantic security.

23 Thus, EUCOM posture is growing stronger, and I remain
24 confident in our ability to affect this transition. But
25 there is much work to do. We must not only match but

1 outpace the modernization and advances of our adversaries.

2 We must invest in the tools and capabilities needed to
3 increase effectiveness across the spectrum of conflict. And
4 we must ensure that we have a force that is credible, agile,
5 and relevant to the dynamic demands of this theater.

6 To this end, EUCOM has identified the following focus
7 areas: ISR collection platforms that improve timely threat
8 information and strategic warning; land force capabilities
9 that deter Russia from further aggression; enhanced naval
10 capabilities for antisubmarine warfare, strike warfare, and
11 amphibious operations; prepositioned equipment to increase
12 our responsiveness to crisis and enhance missile defense
13 systems.

14 Let me conclude by again thanking this committee's
15 members and staff for their continued support of EUCOM not
16 only through increased funding but also by helping us to
17 articulate the challenges that lie before us. Support from
18 other senior leaders and, above all, the public at home and
19 across Europe is vital to ensuring that we have a ready and
20 relevant force.

21 This remains a pivotal time for EUCOM as we transition
22 to meet the demands of a dynamic security environment. I
23 remain confident that through the strength of our alliances
24 and partnerships and with the professionalism of our service
25 members, we will adapt and ensure Europe remains whole,

1 free, and at peace.

2 Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

3 [The prepared statement of General Scaparrotti
4 follows:]

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1 Chairman McCain: Since a quorum is now present, I ask
2 the committee to consider a list of 62 pending military
3 nominations. All of these nominations have been before the
4 committee the required length of time. Is there a motion to
5 favorably report these 62 military nominations?

6 Senator Reed: So moved.

7 Chairman McCain: And is there a second?

8 Senator Nelson: Second.

9 Chairman McCain: All in favor, say aye.

10 [Chorus of ayes.]

11 Chairman McCain: The ayes have it.

12 General, do you have any general comment about the
13 attack yesterday in London and the significance of it?

14 General Scaparrotti: Sir, the attack in London
15 underscores again the dynamic environment in Europe. Europe
16 is challenged by both a flow of terrorists returning to
17 Europe from Syria and other places. They are challenged by
18 an internal threat of those inspired by ISIS or directed by
19 ISIS. And this is an example of the attacks that we have
20 seen in Europe in the past year. It is a difficult
21 challenge. As I said, we remain solid and stand shoulder to
22 shoulder with our allies in NATO to defeat this threat.

23 Chairman McCain: The likelihood of further actions
24 like this, particularly some that are self-indoctrinated, is
25 very hard to stop.

1 General Scaparrotti: It is, sir. And I would just say
2 that the number of threat streams that we have of this type
3 within Europe is probably higher in Europe than any other
4 part of the globe with the exception of the places that we
5 are actually physically fighting in like Syria and
6 Afghanistan and Iraq.

7 Chairman McCain: Is there a connection between that
8 and refugees?

9 General Scaparrotti: The flow of refugees and those
10 who move them, particularly criminal activities that will
11 help move them -- they also are more than willing to move
12 both equipment, personnel, weapons, and people.

13 Chairman McCain: As you know, there was an attempted
14 coup in Montenegro by the Russians. And the Montenegrin
15 membership in NATO is pending, and 26 of the 28 nations I
16 believe have already registered their approval. It is a
17 small country, only 650,000 people. It is very
18 strategically located, as you know. What is your view of
19 the importance of Montenegro especially since they have
20 completed all of the very difficult procedures necessary to
21 become eligible -- what is your view of the importance of
22 their inclusion in NATO?

23 General Scaparrotti: Chairman, it is absolutely
24 critical that they be brought into NATO. They have had this
25 desire. They have met the map. And it underscores NATO's

1 outreach and ability to bring in those who want to determine
2 their own means of government and become a part of NATO. If
3 we were to lose this, it would set back many of the other
4 countries and peoples, particularly in Eastern Europe, who
5 are looking forward to and have their eyes set on the West
6 and becoming a part of NATO.

7 Chairman McCain: So it is very important.

8 General Scaparrotti: I think it is critical, yes.

9 Chairman McCain: I thank you.

10 Finally, you talked about the military presence
11 necessary for additional forces in Europe, but one of the
12 problems we continue to face -- for example, one of the
13 causes of the attempted coup in Montenegro is the saturation
14 of propaganda emanating from Russia. We all know the
15 controversy here in the United States about our election,
16 but we now see them active in the French election
17 apparently, in the German election. But more importantly,
18 they are inundating the Baltics in particular. What are our
19 ideas other than ask for a strategy? What are our ideas as
20 to how to counter what has emerged as one of the greatest
21 threats to stability in Europe?

22 General Scaparrotti: Chairman, I think, first of all,
23 we have to confront this threat as it is, be sober-minded
24 about it. We have to do it as an alliance and with our
25 partners, and we have to call it out. We have to confront

1 it. There seems to be a reluctance in many of the nations
2 to actually confront it when we see it, publicly take it on.
3 And I think we as partners have to form together and begin
4 to do this. As you said, it is prolific, and I believe we
5 have got to confront it.

6 Chairman McCain: We countered Russian propaganda
7 during the Cold War with Radio Free Europe and Voice of
8 America. And all I have seen so far is disarray in Prague
9 about the role, the funding, the strategies and all that.
10 What do you think we need to do there to have our own
11 effective counter-message to be sent? I know that is not
12 exactly in your area of responsibility, but I think it is a
13 kind of warfare.

14 General Scaparrotti: Sir, it is. The Russians see
15 this as a part of that spectrum of warfare. That is their
16 asymmetric approach.

17 I will start here. You know, we have information
18 operations that are military, and I have those that are
19 countering malign influence in Europe. But what we really
20 need is we need a whole-of-government approach, a whole-of-
21 government information campaign, of which I am a small part
22 of that. We need somebody in the lead of that, and then we
23 need to finance it and form a governmental strategy. As you
24 said, in the Cold War, we had one. There is a start on
25 that. We have what is called the RIG, the Russian

1 Information Group, which is the beginnings of that. But
2 that has to be reinforced. It has to be financed. They
3 have to have the authorities that they need to lead that
4 forward.

5 Chairman McCain: And the lead on that would probably
6 be the State Department. Right?

7 General Scaparrotti: The RIG is co-chaired with EUCOM
8 and the State Department is the lead. Yes, sir.

9 Chairman McCain: So it would not help you any if we
10 slashed the spending for the State Department.

11 General Scaparrotti: No, sir.

12 Chairman McCain: Senator Reed?

13 Senator Reed: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14 In fact, you anticipated one of the questions I wanted
15 to raise about the malign influences in elections and
16 institutional capacity that are evident in Europe today.
17 And I think I can safely say that we are really not
18 organized to deal with it at this point. Is that correct?

19 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir. I agree we can get
20 much better organized to deal with this than we are today.

21 Senator Reed: Let me just go a step further and say
22 that in your estimate, what are the strategic effects that
23 the Russians are trying to achieve by these activities?
24 This is not sort of a random kind of just stir up trouble
25 for the sake of stirring up trouble. What are the strategic

1 objectives?

2 General Scaparrotti: Sir, their overall objective is
3 to undermine the governments that oppose them, to reinforce
4 the political parties in each of those countries that might
5 be aligned with them, to demonstrate the weakness of the
6 West and undermine the U.S. and the West. They want to
7 ensure that they can dominate particularly their periphery.
8 And they are doing that through this asymmetric approach.

9 Senator Reed: Now, you have indicated that
10 particularly with the European Defense Initiative and with
11 the response initiative, we are beginning to reorganize, re-
12 equip, et cetera. Can you give us a sense of your
13 priorities? You had a long list of activities that you feel
14 you have to undertake. But the top three issues that you
15 have to get accomplished in the near future.

16 General Scaparrotti: Sir, the top three that we have
17 to get accomplished -- I think, first of all, is we have to
18 get our posture correct for deterrence, and that is across
19 all the services. It not just -- we tend to focus on the
20 Army part of this, but each of the services play a role in
21 that.

22 Secondly, we have to ensure that our command has made
23 the transition to a command that can command and control in
24 the dynamic environment against an aggressor like Russia.
25 We just recently had our command post exercise we have every

1 2 years. It was a great exercise, but what it laid out is
2 the changes we have yet to make within the component
3 commands in Europe in order to fight a foe like Russia.

4 Senator Reed: And with respect to Ukraine, our expert
5 panel on Tuesday, who did a superb job, suggested that is
6 really the critical arena at the moment. If they are able
7 to subvert Ukraine, then that will send shock waves
8 throughout Europe. Is that in your assessment? And just
9 generally, how are we collectively, both NATO, the United
10 States, EUCOM, and the EU, doing in terms of our efforts in
11 the Ukraine?

12 General Scaparrotti: I think the good news with
13 respect to Ukraine is that we are unified and we are
14 organized. NATO has a defense fund that supports it along
15 very similar lines to the U.S. We are thankful to Congress
16 for its funding of our activities there. In fact, we lead a
17 multinational joint commission, which is actually the
18 vehicle that among our allies and the U.S., assesses and
19 then directs the reform that needs to take place in
20 conjunction with Ukraine. They also do the assessment of
21 the needs in terms of equipment and training and guide that
22 training. So we are actually doing that together with our
23 partners, as well as NATO through that one body. And I
24 think it is very effective.

25 Senator Reed: And in that regard, a great deal -- my

1 impression is -- of the civilian capacity building and the
2 anti-corruption efforts is being done by the European Union.
3 So their efforts are absolutely critical to U.S. success.
4 Is that fair?

5 General Scaparrotti: That is true, sir, and it is
6 critical. Our connection to EU, as well as NATO's, has been
7 in the forefront here for the past year or so for many
8 reasons, and that is one of them.

9 Senator Reed: Thank you very much.

10 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

11 Chairman McCain: Senator Fischer?

12 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 And welcome, General. It is nice to see you again.

14 As you know, last week General Selva confirmed Russia's
15 deployment of a weapon system that violates the INF Treaty.
16 And he went on to say that, quote, the system itself
17 presents a risk to most of our facilities in Europe, and we
18 believe that the Russians have deliberately deployed it in
19 order to pose a threat to NATO and the facilities within the
20 NATO area of responsibility. End quote.

21 You touched on this in your opening statement on page
22 5, and you said that the system creates a mismatch in
23 escalatory options. Could you please elaborate on what you
24 mean by that and what the implications are of this
25 deployment?

1 General Scaparrotti: Well, this deployment gives them
2 some advantage in terms of reach and precision within their
3 systems. And when we talk about escalation management, if
4 there is a tension or a crisis with Russia, because of their
5 doctrine and their view that they will escalate to dominate
6 or escalate to deescalate, it creates a very tight range of
7 options when we work through escalation management. So an
8 enhancement like that just makes this a very restrictive and
9 difficult management process you through in deterrence. It
10 is that much more pressurized. So it is a critical
11 enhancement. It is one that we need to respond to.

12 Senator Fischer: You say we need to respond, and you
13 just mentioned options, the word "option." Secretary Carter
14 talked about options. He mentioned counter-force,
15 countervailing capabilities, active defenses, but we did not
16 see any real action in order to pursue those. Do you think
17 that we need to?

18 General Scaparrotti: Yes, I think we do.

19 Senator Fischer: And which of these options do you
20 think would be the most effective in dealing with this?

21 General Scaparrotti: If I could, I would like to take
22 that for a response for the record. I need to think about
23 the comparison of those actually and tell you the best
24 response.

25 [The information follows:]

1 [COMMITTEE INSERT]
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1 Senator Fischer: Okay. Thank you.

2 General Scaparrotti: Thank you.

3 Senator Fischer: At a recent hearing of the Strategic
4 Forces Subcommittee, which I chair, we discussed the
5 implications of Russia's nuclear strategy, often referred to
6 as the escalate/deescalate. And General Koehler, who is a
7 former Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, made the
8 point that the Russian approach reinforces the value of NATO
9 remaining a nuclear alliance, as well as the need for the
10 deterrent value provided by U.S. nuclear weapons that are
11 stationed in Europe.

12 In your written statement, you say that NATO and U.S.
13 nuclear forces continue to be a vital component of our
14 deterrence. Our modernization efforts are crucial. We must
15 preserve a ready, credible, and safe nuclear capability.

16 Do you agree that NATO must remain a nuclear alliance
17 and that the U.S. must continue to station those nuclear
18 weapons on the European continent?

19 General Scaparrotti: Yes, Senator, absolutely I do.

20 Senator Fischer: Can you outline to us specific
21 benefits that we receive by having those stationed there?

22 General Scaparrotti: Well, first of all, it provides
23 an immediate response that is within the NATO alliance as
24 opposed to just the U.S. It represents the alliance in a
25 response by 28 nations, a commitment by 28 nations that we

1 will deter and we will deter their nuclear forces. I think
2 that alone is significant.

3 Secondly, it gives us some other options because we
4 have not only the U.S. but other contingents that provide
5 essential capabilities within that nuclear capability. So
6 there is more agility there as well.

7 Senator Fischer: And it recognizes the importance of
8 deterrence. Thank you, General.

9 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

10 Chairman McCain: Senator Shaheen?

11 Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 And thank you, General Scaparrotti, for being here this
13 morning and for your service to the country.

14 I want to follow up on the line of questioning that
15 Senators McCain and Reed started on the whole information
16 warfare issue. When former General Breedlove was before the
17 committee earlier this week, he pointed out that recently
18 Russia has established an information warfare division
19 within its armed forces. Do you think NATO should be
20 looking at something like that? Are there already efforts
21 underway? You talked about the RIG group, but should we be
22 doing more within NATO to address the propaganda that Russia
23 is putting out throughout Europe and the United States, by
24 the way?

25 General Scaparrotti: Yes, Senator. I think in the

1 United States, we have organization I think to effectively
2 operate. What we need to do is policy and then actions that
3 flow from that within the United States. That is a whole-
4 of-government approach. That is probably not the structure
5 that we have in the way that we need it today. So it is
6 more of a whole-of-government response I would tell you. I
7 think we are pretty agile in the military, rather than
8 establishing some information command, et cetera. We have
9 smaller units that tactically execute these kinds of
10 missions. I have them in EUCOM.

11 Within NATO, NATO has taken this on as well, but it is
12 somewhat nascent at this point. And I think we do have to
13 pursue that. I mean, we have got an adversary here who is
14 using this to very good benefit, and we have to compete
15 short of conflict in this area as well.

16 Senator Shaheen: But as you point out, we do not
17 really have a strategy to do that, and we do not have
18 anybody in charge of that in the United States Government.
19 I mean, we have the Global Engagement Center that is
20 starting up in the State Department. I have spoken, as I am
21 sure others have, with the continuation of the efforts we
22 had during the Soviet Union when we had the Cold War and we
23 had Radio Free Europe, and they did a terrific job in those
24 days. But we do not have a continuation of that that is
25 part of sharing and cooperating with factually presenting

1 what is happening in the West compared to what is going on
2 with Russia's propaganda.

3 So where should that effort be located. Do you have
4 thoughts about who should participate in that and how we
5 better coordinate what we are doing?

6 General Scaparrotti: Yes, Senator, I do. I think
7 actually that the RIG, the Russian Information Group, which
8 I mentioned, is actually a good structure to start with. It
9 has State as the lead, co-chaired with European Command. It
10 has all of the other agencies involved in that. The GEC is
11 a key leader in that, which has been empowered to do the
12 communication piece of the State. But, you know, it is not
13 robustly supported. I do not believe that it has the kind
14 of focus and priority that we need to have. So, therefore,
15 it exists but it needs to really be reinforced, funded. And
16 then as you said, I think we have all the talent and
17 creativity we need in this Nation to do this better than
18 anybody else. We just need to decide to do it.

19 Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

20 There was a report. Actually I agree with you. I just
21 want to make that clear.

22 There was a report earlier this week about Russia
23 training Kurdish fighters. And it was not clear to me to
24 what extent they were doing that. But how is Turkey
25 responding to that report? Are they concerned about what

1 Russia is doing, and how does that affect their sort of
2 growing rapprochement with Russia?

3 General Scaparrotti: Senator, I have not talked to my
4 counterpart, the CHOD in Turkey, since this report came out.
5 So we have not talked directly. I cannot tell you exactly
6 what their response on this would be.

7 But given my association with them and their concern
8 about the PKK and associated groups, Kurd groups, that are
9 aligned with them, I think they would have great concern
10 about it. They want to ensure that the attacks that they
11 have from the PKK are not reinforced in any way -- Turkey
12 does. They also want to ensure that they do not have -- the
13 cantonments in Syria are not connected in Syria so they have
14 Kurdish entity across their entire across their entire
15 southern border. And given those two objectives, I think
16 they are very concerned about it probably.

17 Senator Shaheen: Thank you.

18 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

19 Chairman McCain: Senator Inhofe?

20 Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 General, last weekend, I was in the Ukraine and was
22 observing their training. The 45th does a great job. In
23 fact, that is the same group that not long ago was providing
24 the same training of training in Afghanistan and Iraq. And
25 so they are going to be there for a year long. You know, I

1 watched that, and there is really an art to that. And they
2 are doing a great job because most people will think that
3 they are there to train the Ukrainians or wherever they are
4 stationed, but they really there to train them to train the
5 others, and there is a big difference. So I wanted you to
6 know that they are really doing a good job.

7 During the parliamentary elections in 2014, I was with
8 Poroshenko and the crowd when, of course, they had that huge
9 success, the first time in 96 years. No Communist is in the
10 parliament there. And so, as you know, it became very
11 controversial after that took place and Putin started
12 killing Ukrainians, and we wanted to provide the lethal
13 defensive assistance. Our committee was pretty much
14 unanimous on that. The administration was not that excited
15 about it. So in both the fiscal year 2016, we authorized
16 \$300,000, in fiscal year 2017, authorized \$350,000 for the
17 security assistance for Ukraine, including lethal assistance
18 such as anti-armor weapons.

19 So General Dunford during his nomination hearing said
20 this. Quote. He said, I think it is reasonable that we
21 provide that lethal support for the Ukrainians. Frankly,
22 without that kind of support, we are not going to be able to
23 protect themselves against the Russia aggression.

24 So I would kind of like to get your idea. Do you agree
25 with him? Do you agree also that we need to provide that

1 assistance? What are we providing now and how much more
2 should we?

3 General Scaparrotti: Senator, thank you. In short,
4 yes, I do agree with him. I have been there twice recently.

5 I would note that I agree. The Guard is doing a very
6 good job there and an important one in their training
7 relationship with the Ukrainians.

8 In terms of lethal support, the Ukrainians are in a
9 very tough fight, which you saw. They are very disciplined
10 soldiers. But they are facing what we say are separatists.
11 They are actually Russian proxies in my mind. They are
12 being provided very lethal equipment. The Russians are
13 providing the separatists that. The Russians are also
14 testing some of their new TTPs there. So we need to
15 reinforce the Ukrainian military as much as we can and
16 provide them the best opportunity to fight what is a very
17 lethal Russian proxy at this point.

18 Senator Inhofe: And I agree with that. I have a
19 question for the record as to what kind of equipment
20 specifically we should do.

21 But I want to mention one thing. Do you happen to
22 know-- his name is Fatmir Mediu. He was the Secretary of
23 Defense in the Albanian defense. They had a meeting, and I
24 happened to be attending that meeting -- it was on January
25 31st -- kind of a roundtable talking about ISIS and the

1 threat in the Balkans. And it was kind of revealing.

2 Apparently a lot of the ISIS recruiting is taking place in
3 the Balkans right now. Do you have any comment to make as
4 to what our activity is there in terms of what the threat is
5 there? Are we working with them as closely as we should?

6 General Scaparrotti: I am very concerned about the
7 stability in the Balkans, and one of the reasons is that
8 what is generally a moderate or a Western-looking Islamic
9 population is increasingly being affected by extremist
10 influence there. And part of that is recruiting for ISIS.
11 And so it is a trend right now. It is one I think we have
12 to pay very close attention to.

13 Senator Inhofe: Okay. That is good. I appreciate it.

14 Now, my time has expired, but for the record, I would
15 like to get as specific information as we could as to what
16 best we could afford to send over there against the
17 aggression that they have. Okay?

18 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir. Thank you.

19 Senator Inhofe: Thank you.

20 Chairman McCain: Senator Heinrich?

21 Senator Heinrich: Welcome, General.

22 As was mentioned earlier, it is being reported that our
23 Secretary of State will be missing the NATO summit of
24 foreign ministers in a couple weeks. This obviously comes
25 at a time when the administration has criticized the value

1 of NATO. Russia is meddling in European elections, and
2 Russia is threatening our NATO allies in the Baltics.

3 Do you have any opinions on whether this sends the
4 right signal to our NATO allies? And what kind of messages
5 do you think we should be sending to our NATO allies at this
6 time?

7 General Scaparrotti: Senator, I think it is essential
8 that our allies in NATO understand that we are absolutely
9 committed to the alliance and continue to be a key leader
10 within the alliance.

11 I noted this morning that the Secretary-General and the
12 Secretary had met, and they are looking for a date that all
13 of the allies can meet for the foreign ministers conference.
14 And I hope that is, in fact, worked out and that becomes a
15 reality.

16 Senator Heinrich: As do I.

17 General, Russian denial, deception, disinformation were
18 all important parts of the hybrid warfare campaign that we
19 saw during the illegal seizure of Crimea and its Russian
20 support for separatists in eastern Ukraine. As EUCOM
21 Commander, you lead much of the effort to identify and
22 attribute Russian disinformation operations. Can you
23 describe for us how Russia is organized to conduct this kind
24 of information warfare and what techniques you are seeing on
25 display in the Ukraine?

1 General Scaparrotti: Thank you.

2 When you are talking about this, you think about it in
3 a military organization, but frankly, what I think is
4 important is that Russia actually has a very broad set of
5 groups to include their intelligence groups that are doing
6 this. So they actually have a whole-of-government approach
7 on this, which I think makes it one more difficult. It is
8 one of the reasons that we also see what I think is a pretty
9 rapid or agile use of social media, TV --

10 Senator Heinrich: Absolutely.

11 General Scaparrotti: -- cyber, et cetera. So it is a
12 force to be reckoned with at this point. And I think it is
13 that organization that gives them the ability.

14 Senator Heinrich: Do you have recommendations in terms
15 of building our capacity or that of our allies and partners
16 in the region to be able to resist these kinds Russian
17 influence activities?

18 General Scaparrotti: Well, I think, first of all, in
19 EUCOM we have elements that today have missions to counter
20 Russian malign influence, both to identify it, counter it,
21 and then, third, we are building partner capacity. And we
22 are exchanging techniques, et cetera. Estonia has an
23 excellent cyber center of excellence, for instance. That is
24 a key node in NATO. We work very closely with that. So we
25 need to continue those kinds of partnerships and exchange of

1 skill and understanding how they are working. And I think,
2 particularly as an alliance, we can counter this.

3 Senator Heinrich: I think because of their proximity,
4 we actually have a lot to learn from our Balkan partners,
5 and given what we have seen even in our own elections, it is
6 time to learn those lessons.

7 Russia's air defense systems like the S-300 and S-400
8 threaten to block our ability to be able to project power in
9 the event of a conflict in the European region, particularly
10 in the Baltics. This certainly undermines the U.S. and
11 NATO's Article 5 commitment to the defense of these allies
12 and raises concerns about the alliance's ability to deter an
13 increasingly aggressive Russia.

14 How capable are the Russian air defense systems
15 particularly in Kaliningrad?

16 General Scaparrotti: Sir, I would just state in an
17 unclassified venue, they are very capable. The newer
18 systems like the S-400 is a definite enhancement in their
19 capabilities. That is why we are concerned about it. As
20 you stated, their location in Kaliningrad and Crimea and the
21 Mediterranean provides difficulty for our access and
22 mobility. We can counter this. I am confident of that.

23 Senator Heinrich: Do you have opinions in that regard
24 on what types of next generation technologies, for example,
25 we will need to effectively counter the Russian A2/AD

1 capabilities?

2 General Scaparrotti: Up front what I talked about in
3 terms of our advanced aircraft, fifth generation, enhanced
4 munitions, particularly long-range precision munitions,
5 electronic warfare, those things generally is what we need
6 to continue our modernization efforts on. And if you would
7 like, I could give you a more specific in a classified
8 response, obviously.

9 Senator Heinrich: I would appreciate that, General.
10 Thank you, Chairman.

11 Chairman McCain: Senator Rounds?

12 Senator Rounds: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 General, thank you for your service. I appreciate the
14 opportunity to visit for just a few minutes today.

15 With regard to Montenegro, the chairman had begun the
16 discussion in terms of the possibilities that they could
17 become a member of NATO. If they were to become a member of
18 NATO, what would you expect the Russian response to be and
19 how would you prepare for it?

20 General Scaparrotti: Senator, I think we have probably
21 seen their response in terms of their activity and their
22 attempt to block that. I think to a certain extent, they
23 know this is going to happen. I trust it will.

24 In a conversation with one of NATO's ministers, one of
25 the countries that has communication with Russian

1 leadership, he shared with me that a Russian leader told him
2 that Putin had said he lost Montenegro, but there will not
3 be another Montenegro. I think that is an indication of how
4 they think and how important it is to them that these other
5 nations that seek to have a democratic government and turn
6 to the West are under threat. It is one of the reasons that
7 I think Russia continues to have frozen conflicts and be
8 present in places like Georgia and Ukraine because it is
9 their means of controlling that.

10 Senator Rounds: You have got extensive background in
11 Europe. You know a number of the European leaders. With
12 the change in administrations, naturally there are going to
13 be some questions in terms of policy changes, decision-
14 making processes, and so forth. What questions are you
15 getting from your European contacts in terms of leaders and
16 what concerns do they have?

17 General Scaparrotti: Well, I think, first of all, as a
18 new administration comes in, they want to ensure that we are
19 committed to the alliance and the security of the
20 transatlantic AOR. For instance, Secretary Mattis at the
21 first NATO meeting at the defense ministers conference made
22 our commitment very clear, as did Vice President Pence, at
23 Munich. And I think that is critical. They look to that.

24 They also now look to what are the policies and are the
25 policies consistent with security in the transatlantic

1 region. Of course, in a new administration, they are
2 looking forward to policies with respect to NATO, policies
3 with respect to Afghanistan and others.

4 Senator Rounds: When it comes to doing your job, you
5 clearly have to have the tools and the tools in proper
6 working order in order to get the job done. If you could
7 give us a list of those areas that you have the most concern
8 with our capabilities today. And I will just give you an
9 example. The fact that right now if we have one task force
10 leaving the Mediterranean coming through and another one
11 going in, in some cases we are actually stopping in the
12 middle of the Mediterranean and trading ammo because we do
13 not have enough ammo to literally maintain operational
14 capabilities in multiple task forces. Those types of things
15 concern us. We have a nuclear submarine sitting at the dock
16 because literally we cannot get the maintenance done on it
17 so that it is certified to die at this stage of the game --
18 a nuclear submarine. The readiness clearly is not there in
19 some cases.

20 Do you have issues right now under your command that
21 you would share with us that you have concerns with?

22 General Scaparrotti: Senator, I would like to get into
23 detail in a classified or closed session. But generally I
24 would say this. The demands of our security strategy today
25 in the dynamic world that we are working in requires us to

1 have more capacity than we have today in our armed forces.
2 You noted the Navy. So in Europe, I do not have the carrier
3 or the submarine capacity that would best enable me to do my
4 job in EUCOM. It is sufficient, but it is not what ideally
5 I would like to have to deter Russia, assure our allies,
6 build their capacity, work with them on the basis that we
7 need to work with them. So that is an example of the areas.

8 Now, you mentioned munitions. I am concerned about
9 that as well because we are using munitions today in those
10 places where we are in conflict. And the adversaries that
11 we face, for instance, Russia or China or North Korea, will
12 be high intensity conflicts. And we have to invest in the
13 stockpiles that we need, and we also have to invest in
14 enhancing those munitions so as we look to the future, we do
15 not find ourselves in a position where our adversaries have
16 outpaced us.

17 Senator Rounds: Thank you, General.

18 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

19 Chairman McCain: Senator Peters?

20 Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 And thank you, General Scaparrotti, for being here
22 today. I certainly appreciate your testimony and also
23 wanted to thank you for being very generous with your time
24 at the Munich conference where we had an opportunity to
25 discuss many of these issues at length.

1 General, as you are well aware, we are increasingly
2 relying on space, cyberspace, and fiber optic communications
3 cables in all aspects of our lives. And these systems are
4 also critical for social and economic activity, and their
5 assured access and availability is vital to the U.S.
6 strategic stability. And when you look at Russia's navy
7 operations right now in the EUCOM theater, which includes a
8 significant footprint in the Arctic, which is growing
9 dramatically without necessary response from us, and a \$2.4
10 billion expansion of the Black Sea fleet by 2020, Russia
11 appears committed to bolstering their military
12 infrastructure on EUCOM's flanks. This increased OPSTEMPO
13 includes naval activity that suggests that Russia right now
14 is exploring undersea cable vulnerabilities at much greater
15 depths, depths where the cables are difficult to monitor and
16 breaks are harder to repair.

17 So my question is, in general, what is your assessment
18 as to whether or not we have sufficient redundancy within
19 EUCOM's command and control architecture, to include
20 ballistic missile defense systems, to withstand a
21 coordinated attack on our undersea, terrestrial, and space-
22 based communication systems that you rely on?

23 General Scaparrotti: Sir, what I would like to do is
24 respond to that in a classified venue so I can give you a
25 very accurate answer.

1 Senator Peters: Sure.

2 General Scaparrotti: I am confident of our ability to
3 operate today. As I just said, we just did our command post
4 exercise, and we were looking at that. But we need to
5 modernize what we have today in terms of command and
6 control, as you noted, in order to have the right kind of
7 resilience with the adversary that we face. You need a good
8 deal of redundancy to be sure. And that is one of the
9 areas. If you note in a classified venue, what I have
10 asked of OSD, that is one of the key areas that I think we
11 need to work on is the C-4 structure within Europe.

12 Senator Peters: Well, I would appreciate that and
13 actually following up on Senator Heinrich's questions too as
14 you come back to brief on some of the A2/AD capabilities. I
15 would be interested in learning more about that,
16 particularly when it comes to next generation, what we need
17 to be investing in today to be ready for the years ahead as
18 warfare changes dramatically in the next few years.

19 But based on capabilities, to follow up my last
20 question here related to capabilities, in the fiscal year
21 2016 NDAA budget, I co-led an effort to enhance lethality of
22 the Stryker vehicles with a 30 millimeter cannon. This was
23 in response to an operational needs statement from the 2nd
24 Cavalry Regiment where the Strykers were the heaviest
25 vehicles permanently stationed in Europe at that time. And

1 I understand that the work to add the 30 millimeter cannon
2 to Strykers is going well. The first prototype was
3 successfully delivered last October, and training is
4 beginning on those vehicles.

5 The ERI also provides funds for upgrading the Abrams
6 tanks to be prepositioned in Europe as well.

7 So could you just provide an update on the need for
8 this capability and if we need to continue to be moving
9 forward and that any lapses in that upgrade either of the
10 Abrams or the Stryker is a problem or not for you?

11 General Scaparrotti: Senator, thank you very much.

12 It is not a problem for me, but it is a priority --

13 Senator Peters: Right.

14 General Scaparrotti: -- given the adversary that we
15 have who continues to modernize. Particularly Russia is
16 modernizing their armored force, as well as in each one of
17 their services, they are making advancements. So it is
18 critical that we outpace that, that we provide our soldiers
19 in this case the very best equipment that we can and we
20 continue to upgrade it.

21 Abrams is a fine tank, but as technology changes, we
22 can make upgrades to it and make it better, and we make it
23 better in terms of defense as well. And we owe that to our
24 soldiers.

25 Senator Peters: And the Stryker as well?

1 General Scaparrotti: And the Stryker as well,
2 absolutely.

3 Senator Peters: Great. Thank you, General. I
4 appreciate it.

5 General Scaparrotti: Thank you.

6 Chairman McCain: Senator Sullivan?

7 Senator Sullivan: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 And, General, good to see you. Thanks for spending
9 time with a number of us in Munich.

10 Do you agree that one of the most important strategic
11 advantages we have in terms of our national security is that
12 we are an ally-rich nation, our adversaries are ally-poor?

13 General Scaparrotti: Senator, absolutely.

14 Senator Sullivan: And do you also agree that the ally-
15 poor nations like Russia, China, North Korea, Iran -- that
16 they recognize that -- they do not have many allies at all--
17 and that they try to undermine our alliances? Is that not
18 what certainly Vladimir Putin is up to?

19 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir. I think his intent is
20 actually to fracture NATO, and I think it is because he does
21 fear NATO. He knows the power of that alliance.

22 Senator Sullivan: So given that, are we doing enough
23 diplomatically, militarily right now -- the Trump
24 administration -- to reinforce our alliances, expand our
25 alliances, deepen our alliances? What is your assessment of

1 what we are doing and what we could be doing better whether
2 it is in the military realm or diplomatic realm? How are we
3 doing on that?

4 General Scaparrotti: Sir, I think we absolutely have a
5 focus on building partner capacity, building our
6 relationships with our partners. We are a leader in NATO.
7 From a EUCOM perspective, that is something -- I mean, we
8 work on this every day. I do not think there is any
9 question of that particularly on the military side. It is a
10 very close relationship with our partners. It is day to
11 day. And you know, it works both ways. We learn from our
12 alliance partners as well.

13 Senator Sullivan: Are there things that you recommend
14 that we could do more of or better in that regard? It is
15 really, really an important issue -- or the Senate? We play
16 a big role in terms of our allies, treaties.

17 General Scaparrotti: Well, I think in terms of the
18 alliance itself, here again, I keep coming back to it, but I
19 think it is whole-of-government in the sense that every
20 agency in the government does their part and it is clear to
21 our allies that from every agency in the United States, that
22 the alliance is important and it shows and demonstrates in
23 its actions that the alliance is the bedrock of
24 transatlantic security. So there is no disagreement in what
25 they see in terms of action, not just on the military side

1 but in terms of our diplomacy, our information, our
2 economics, et cetera.

3 Senator Sullivan: I wanted to switch over to an issue
4 that a number of us have been focused on and we have had
5 discussions on it, is what is happening in the Arctic and
6 the increasing importance of that region in terms of
7 strategic resources, transportation, a lot of concerns of
8 our NATO allies like the Norwegians and others about the
9 significant Russian buildup in the Arctic. And as you know,
10 it does not look like a friendly buildup: four new brigade
11 combat teams, a new Arctic military command, very aggressive
12 actions in the high north, including a military exercise
13 that was a SNAP exercise with close to 50,000 troops that
14 EUCOM was barely aware of, which is kind of, in and of
15 itself, not a good sign.

16 A number of us, Senator King, the chairman, were
17 concerned enough that we did not have a strategy on that.
18 So we required the Secretary of Defense to actually put
19 forward a new Arctic strategy. There is a classified and
20 unclassified version. Have you read that?

21 General Scaparrotti: I have not read it, no.

22 Senator Sullivan: So I would highly recommend that you
23 take a look at it because it is the new DOD strategy. It is
24 not perfect, but it is a heck of a lot better than the one
25 that was previously published by DOD, which was pretty much

1 a joke. And so, of course, EUCOM has a lot of important
2 elements to play in that strategy.

3 But one of the things it emphasizes, it does talk about
4 our strategic interests, which the last strategy did not
5 even bother to do. But one of the things it emphasizes is
6 looking at freedom of navigation operations, the ability to
7 actually push back on the Russian buildup, which includes 40
8 icebreakers, 13 more under construction, several new
9 seaports and harbors.

10 But although it emphasizes FONOPS, do you think right
11 now if Russia decided to deny access to vital U.S. or Arctic
12 shipping lanes in the Arctic region, that you as the
13 Commander of EUCOM -- could you provide the President an
14 option of conducting a surface FONOP to challenge that act
15 like we are trying to do in the South China Sea, given our
16 assets right now? Because the strategy emphasizes FONOPS,
17 but it certainly seems like the means that we have right now
18 would not enable you to make such a recommendation to the
19 President. What do you think about that, General?

20 General Scaparrotti: I think it is would depend as
21 well on the circumstances in terms of location and time of
22 year because of the assets that we have as well. As you
23 know, the northern sea route lays in closest proximity to
24 Russia's coastline as well, which complicates that given
25 their military buildup. So we clearly need to invest more

1 in the kind of assets that help us in the Arctic. So that
2 is how I would respond to that, Senator.

3 We can give options. We certainly need to improve our
4 capabilities. And I am concerned as well about our
5 capabilities with respect to the high north and security of
6 the North Atlantic, et cetera.

7 Senator Sullivan: That is just a diagram of what the
8 Russians are doing. It is pretty significant.

9 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

10 Chairman McCain: Senator King?

11 Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 First, General, I want to thank you and your staff for
13 preparing and presenting to the committee this map which I
14 think is extraordinary. I am a great believer that you
15 cannot confront your adversaries unless you understand them,
16 unless you understand how they think. And to me the amazing
17 or very interesting and illuminating part of this map it
18 shows the borders of the Soviet Union in 1989 and today the
19 borders of Russia. And essentially from Putin's point of
20 view, his border retreated about 1,000 miles across a whole
21 front of eastern Europe. And clearly that is part of his
22 world view in terms of Russia's proper place in the world.
23 Would you agree?

24 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir, I agree. That is why I
25 think the map is illustrative because I think if you are

1 Putin, you are looking out for Moscow and you see what I
2 think he would consider to have been his strategic buffer.
3 It tells you a bit about his mindset, and from what we know
4 about him, he feels as though he has been encroached upon,
5 that he has this sphere of influence that he believes is
6 rightfully his. Of course, these are nations that have a
7 right to determine their own government.

8 Senator King: And part of Russia's history is a kind
9 of paranoia about the West, going back to Frederick the
10 Great and probably Napoleon. They have, in fact, been
11 invaded from the West. And again, that contributes to this
12 mindset. Would you not agree?

13 General Scaparrotti: I agree, sir. Yes, sir.

14 Senator King: And that gets to my real concern -- and
15 I have raised this in other hearings -- both in the South
16 China Sea or in Europe, is the danger of an accidental war,
17 a danger of misunderstanding, confusion, leading to some
18 kind of escalation.

19 What protections do we have from a misunderstanding?
20 For example, we deploy what we consider a defensive rocket
21 battery, missile battery in Poland, and the Russians read
22 that as an aggressive act, and it goes from there. How do
23 we ensure that does not happen? As I view the world today,
24 I think this is our gravest sort of state-to-state danger,
25 is misunderstanding and leading to accidental conflict.

1 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir. The thing that I worry
2 about the most just day to day is that there is a
3 miscalculation or an issue where we have forces in close
4 proximity. So how do we deal with that?

5 First of all, there are international norms in the air,
6 at sea, et cetera that day to day the Russians adhere to as
7 well. We have seen violations of that on their part. But
8 it enables us --

9 Senator King: Deconfliction.

10 General Scaparrotti: It is deconfliction. That is
11 correct. It is a good word.

12 The second thing is I think it is important that we
13 communicate with them. Today we do that primarily through
14 the media, et cetera. But we have, as you know, connection
15 with the Russians for deconfliction. I think that
16 communication is important because what I try to do in
17 EUCOM --

18 Senator King: Do you have direct lines of
19 communication with your opposite number in Russia, for
20 example?

21 General Scaparrotti: I do not today.

22 Senator King: Do you not think that would be a good
23 idea? You could say, wait a minute, that missile was
24 launched by accident, do not get alarmed. I mean, I think
25 having that kind of communication and at the higher level,

1 at the State Department or at the White House level, there
2 should be the opportunity anyway for this kind of
3 communication.

4 General Scaparrotti: We do have communication for
5 deconfliction within OSD today. It is limited. I agree
6 with you. I think communication is an important component
7 of deterrence, for instance. But I think also given
8 Russia's behavior, there is some limitation to that. We
9 should not reward them for some of their bad behavior as
10 well. So we should do what we need to do to ensure we are
11 safe and we deconflict.

12 Senator King: I am not suggesting warning them. I am
13 just suggesting if something occurs, you could get on the
14 line and say, wait a minute. Do not misinterpret that.
15 That is where the concern comes.

16 General Scaparrotti: That is correct.

17 Senator King: We talked a lot -- and I just want to
18 associate myself with many of the other comments about the
19 information war. To me, the specific answer to our failure
20 to engage successfully in the information war goes back to,
21 I think, 1998 or 1999 when we abolished USIA. There is no
22 single point in the United States Government today that is
23 in charge of information, and I think it is inexcusable that
24 the country that invented Hollywood and Facebook is being
25 defeated on the information battlefield. And clearly, that

1 is part of the war that we are engaged in. Putin is
2 achieving great success in Europe and across the world and
3 one would argue in many areas without firing a shot through
4 effective use of information. I think our friends on the
5 Foreign Relations Committee perhaps can consider that. But
6 USIA was the point and now we do not have it. So I hope we
7 can recover that capacity sooner rather than later.

8 Thank you very much, General.

9 Senator Reed [presiding]: On behalf of Chairman
10 McCain, Senator Cruz please.

11 Senator Cruz: Thank you very much, Senator Reed.

12 General, good morning. Thank you for your service.

13 The European theater continues to be a vital concern, a
14 critical and complex region that will always be near the top
15 of our national security priorities.

16 I want to begin by focusing on the repeated reports we
17 are seeing of Russia's growing support for the Taliban and
18 for ISIS. General Nicholson testified last month that
19 Russia is attempting to legitimize the Taliban and undermine
20 the Afghan Government. Just a few weeks ago, General Votel
21 expressed his concerns regarding the extent to which Russia
22 has managed to prop up the Assad regime. And in the same
23 hearing, General Waldhauser said that Russia is trying to
24 exert influence on the outcome of which entity emerges with
25 control of the government inside Libya. That is a fairly

1 comprehensive list of radical Islamic terrorist hotspots
2 across the globe from Afghanistan to the Middle East to
3 Africa and Russia seeking additional influence with each.

4 How should this inform our future strategic choices
5 with respect to Russia, and what impact would that have on
6 your AOR?

7 General Scaparrotti: Senator, thank you. I think
8 those are all accurate. I agree with all their statements.

9 I think actually that it is a part of Russia's intent
10 to present themselves as a global power. In my view, where
11 they are involved, they are not necessarily so concerned
12 about the outcome, just that they can be a part of it. They
13 can be seen as being a part of that. Whether it is an
14 effective outcome I do not think it is as much of a concern
15 to them.

16 So that is what we need to take from this, more so from
17 our point of view the fact that they are a spoiler often in
18 many of these cases. So we also have to engage them in this
19 manner, and we have to engage globally as well in these
20 places in order to ensure that we have the proper influence.

21 Senator Cruz: And if Russia were to succeed in
22 undermining the Afghan Government, what would the effect of
23 that be on the NATO alliance?

24 General Scaparrotti: It would be significant. I mean,
25 NATO and the United States in my view must win in

1 Afghanistan. And I agree. I have seen the influence of
2 Russia of late, an increased influence in terms of
3 association and perhaps even supply to the Taliban.

4 Senator Cruz: We have also seen over the past few
5 months numerous instances of Russian aggression or hostile
6 behavior such as Russian jets buzzing the U.S. Navy
7 destroyer Porter and numerous intercepts of U.S. aircraft in
8 the Baltic Sea. And some of these incidents have been
9 exceedingly unsafe. Recently Russia also deployed a land-
10 based cruise missile in clear violation of the INF Treaty.
11 And also, a Russian spy auxiliary, gathering intelligence,
12 ship conducted operations off the U.S. coast near our
13 submarine bases.

14 General, in your professional opinion, what should be
15 the U.S.'s responses to these actions? How do we reduce
16 Russia's flouting of international norms?

17 General Scaparrotti: Senator, first of all, we must be
18 strong in all that we do. We should confront them in each
19 of these occasions or each of these incidents. And then we
20 need to sail and fly every place that is within
21 international norms and international airways and maritime.
22 We just need to keep doing that. You know, for instance, in
23 the Baltic or in the Black Sea, these encounters are their
24 means of showing us their displeasure for us being there.
25 We have every right to be there. We have, in fact,

1 increased our presence, and I think that is the right step,
2 increase our presence and insist on the fact that we have
3 every right within international law to operate there and
4 continue to do so.

5 Senator Cruz: Let me shift to a different question.
6 American forces have conducted several deployments in
7 support of Operation Atlantic Resolve to demonstrate our
8 commitment to the stability of Europe. Recently 400
9 soldiers and 24 AH-64 Apache helicopters deployed to Europe
10 from Fort Bliss. However, earlier this month, the Army's
11 Deputy of Chief for Operations, Lieutenant General Joseph
12 Anderson, expressed concerns regarding sustainable readiness
13 for the Army's future rotations. In essence, it sounds like
14 soldiers that are coming home from one deployment will have
15 less time to get ready and train before re-deploying to the
16 European theater. That or the Army will be forced to reduce
17 its global commitments.

18 General, do you share the same concerns as General
19 Anderson regarding this rotation of forces. And what impact
20 do you see in your AOR, and what do you recommend to improve
21 the situation?

22 General Scaparrotti: Senator, first of all, it is
23 crucial that we continue the rotations within Europe for
24 deterrence of Russia and for assurance and support of our
25 allies, the commitments that we have made. But I do agree

1 with General Anderson that, for instance, in the Army, as an
2 Army officer, we are less than a 1-to-2 dwell. We are
3 turning our people very quickly. It is the reason that our
4 Chief has said that we need to grow our force, and we need
5 to focus on readiness, as he is doing, because we are
6 committed today at a very high rate.

7 Senator Cruz: Thank you, General.

8 Senator Reed: Thank you, Senator Cruz.

9 On behalf of the chairman, Senator Donnelly please.

10 Senator Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

11 General, thank you very much for being here.

12 We talk a lot about Russia's escalate to deescalate
13 strategy or the idea that Russia has indicated through its
14 words and its exercises that it sees the use of tactical
15 nuclear weapons to supposedly deescalate a conflict as a
16 realistic option.

17 How should NATO respond to this? And does the United
18 States have the capabilities whether through dual-use
19 aircraft or strategic bombers to deter such an escalatory
20 move?

21 General Scaparrotti: Senator, thank you.

22 As I have said, we should be strong in the face of both
23 their rhetoric, their actions, and their modernization. And
24 we do have the capability to deter this. But we must remain
25 strong and we must continue to modernize given the pace of

1 their modernization so that in the future we continue our
2 dominance.

3 Senator Donnelly: I am just wondering personally. Do
4 you think that Vladimir Putin and/or the Russians believe
5 that they could use a nuclear weapon without a similar
6 scaled response?

7 General Scaparrotti: That is a good question. I think
8 that about that a lot.

9 You know, they have said publicly that they see the
10 potential of the use of a nuclear weapon in what we would
11 consider a tactical and conventional means. And that is
12 just alarming.

13 Senator Donnelly: I think it is a clear
14 misunderstanding of who we are as well --

15 General Scaparrotti: Exactly.

16 Senator Donnelly: -- is what I think.

17 I was privileged to be over in Georgia and Ukraine not
18 too long ago. My friend and fellow Hoosier, Senator Lugar,
19 helped create the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction
20 program to combat the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
21 And while we were there, we spent a lot of time working with
22 the Georgian and Ukraine Government in efforts to counter
23 the smuggling of those materials.

24 Russia has destabilized borders in both these
25 countries, and I am concerned about the impact that has had

1 on the ability to smuggle nuclear material through
2 uncontrolled regions like eastern Ukraine. In Georgia, in
3 fact, the special police unit calls those kind of areas the
4 black holes. It is a serious threat given that the
5 smuggling networks in these regions reach to the terrorist
6 networks in the Middle East. That is the pipeline.

7 And I was wondering what EUCOM is doing to counter this
8 effort at the present time.

9 General Scaparrotti: Thank you, Senator. Your
10 pipeline that you described is accurate.

11 We have a transnational threats element within EUCOM.
12 It is whole-of-government. It relies mostly on not just the
13 military piece but mostly on other agencies within our
14 government connection with our partners and allies, with
15 Europol within EU, et cetera. It is a network essentially
16 to help us highlight criminal networks. They are often very
17 closely aligned and working with our terrorist networks. So
18 that is one of the major things that we do. It is an
19 important function, and it is a central part of our counter-
20 transnational threats line of effort, which is one of our
21 five lines of effort.

22 Senator Donnelly: I want to follow on some of the
23 questions my colleague, Senator Fischer, asked earlier about
24 Russia's INF violations and their deployment of nuclear-
25 armed ground-launched cruise missile. They have similar air

1 and sea launch capabilities that do not violate the INF. So
2 why do you think they are deliberately choosing to deploy a
3 seemingly redundant capability on land?

4 General Scaparrotti: Well, I think that it would
5 provide them a capability internal to their country that
6 gives much great reach, simply put.

7 Senator Donnelly: Do you feel that all of the steps
8 being taken in Kaliningrad with the Iskander short-range
9 missiles -- that the goal of all of that is to divide us, to
10 undermine NATO, to try to separate the commitment from one
11 to the other?

12 General Scaparrotti: Senator, I think that is part of
13 it. I think much of what they do is to undermine confidence
14 in NATO, undermine confidence in the West. You know, it is
15 to threaten them with the idea that we can have control over
16 a swath of your country or a number of countries in the
17 region with these systems.

18 Senator Donnelly: I want to thank you. You have a
19 real challenge on your hands at this time, but we want you
20 to know we are 100 percent behind you, that we will do
21 everything we can to provide you with all you need and that
22 you can tell all of our friends and allies over there that
23 we have their back.

24 General Scaparrotti: Thank you, Senator.

25 Senator Donnelly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1 Senator Reed: On behalf of Chairman McCain, Senator
2 Ernst please.

3 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

4 Thank you, General Scaparrotti, very much.

5 It is good to know that you do support providing lethal
6 aid to our Ukrainian friends. It seems like we all do agree
7 that there should be that lethal assistance out there. And
8 I have made this clear to this administration. I made it
9 clear to the last administration as well. But I do hope
10 that this administration decides to provide the assistance
11 as soon as possible.

12 Recently I have grown increasingly concerned about
13 Russia's use of tactical drones to spot for artillery and
14 advanced technology for communication and GPS jamming. What
15 types of advanced technologies are the Russians using
16 against Ukraine and in other places as well? And is there
17 specific technology that we should be considering when we
18 are providing Ukraine the opportunity to counter that
19 technology?

20 General Scaparrotti: Thank you, Senator.

21 Actually in Ukraine what we see the Russians do is
22 somewhat what they have done in Syria, and that is use the
23 Ukrainian conflict as a place that they can test some of
24 their new technologies or TTPs, and one of them, as you
25 mentioned, is the sensor to shoot our linkages between

1 weapon systems and the use of drones, et cetera. That is a
2 problem that we are working on hard ourselves because we are
3 seeing a proliferation of that not just with the Russians
4 but in some limited ways as well with terrorists. So we are
5 working those technologies. The work with Ukraine provides
6 us an opportunity to test some of the things that we are
7 doing as well. And we simply need to make EW and those
8 kinds of things available to them that can help counter what
9 the Russian proxy forces are bringing to bear there.

10 Senator Ernst: Absolutely. Thank you.

11 And you also mentioned that you were concerned about
12 the stability in the Balkans. And on Tuesday, Ambassador
13 Burns joined us here and highlighted Russia's increasing
14 influence in Serbia. And specifically he did mention the
15 recent coup and assassination attempt in Montenegro that was
16 orchestrated by the Russians in Belgrade. And in light of
17 that effort targeting NATO interest, do you think we should
18 have a more robust presence in Kosovo as a means to deter
19 the Russians in the Balkans?

20 General Scaparrotti: Senator, I do. I have been to
21 the Balkans several times in recent months primarily to
22 learn more myself about the actual situation there, but also
23 to bring focus to it. The Russians are active in
24 undermining our efforts in the Balkans today, and we need to
25 provide additional interagency focus. I think this is a

1 matter of not just the military support with, say, the
2 Kosovo security force, et cetera, which we have troops in.
3 I think it is also a diplomatic and informational effort
4 with us and importantly with our partners because, as you
5 know, NATO and the EU have a large role to play in the
6 Balkans as well today and lead many of these organizational
7 efforts. So we all need to work together. And the military
8 is a part of it. On that point, I would say we should not
9 reduce our force size particularly the Kosovo security force
10 because it is kind of the bedrock of stability right now.
11 But we do need a much more robust diplomatic/informational
12 effort among the alliance there.

13 Senator Ernst: Absolutely. I think everything should
14 be on the table at this point in reassuring and assisting
15 our allies, our friends in the Balkans.

16 And then just very quickly, you have mentioned the
17 cyber center and how great it is, the cyber center that we
18 have in Estonia. And I will be meeting with their
19 ambassador later to discuss their cyber defense center of
20 excellence. So I am really excited about that opportunity.

21 And can you just tell me very briefly how well EUCOM
22 and NATO are prepared to defend against cyber attacks,
23 especially those that are aimed at disrupting the elections
24 that we will see ongoing in Europe?

25 General Scaparrotti: Well, first of all, within EUCOM

1 I think we are postured well to deal with cyber. Cyber
2 Command works very closely with us, and literally it is a
3 dynamic relationship because within the cyber domain, things
4 change so rapidly. So when we just had our exercise here
5 last month, we had an element from Cyber Command that acted
6 as a component per se in EUCOM reporting directly to me. So
7 I think we are modernizing, we are moving forward. We have
8 got good support. We have got a lot of work to do
9 particularly in capacity.

10 Within NATO, NATO recently determined that cyber was a
11 domain at the Warsaw Summit. That was important because
12 what it did is it provided direction to work doctrine and
13 policy in a much fuller way which is the commander within
14 NATO I need, and it gave me authorities to do more within
15 cyber in NATO, which we need to do. So on the defensive
16 side, pretty good. Beyond that, we are at the beginning of
17 this in terms of NATO complete cyber capability.

18 Senator Ernst: And I do hope that is something that we
19 can work on with them.

20 Thank you for your great service, sir. Thank you.

21 Chairman McCain [presiding]: Senator Warren?

22 Senator Warren: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

23 And thank you for being here, General.

24 I want to quickly ask about the importance of our non-
25 military foreign assistance to your mission. When you

1 appeared before this committee last year for your nomination
2 as EUCOM Commander, you said -- and I am going to quote you
3 here -- I strongly support the collaborative interagency
4 approach. In my experience, it takes a network with all
5 required agencies to defeat a threat network.

6 So, General, do you still agree with that statement?

7 General Scaparrotti: I do, absolutely.

8 Senator Warren: The budget proposal put out by the
9 Trump administration last week calls for a 29 percent cut to
10 the State Department and significant cuts to other agencies
11 with international responsibilities. General, would funding
12 cuts to agencies that conduct diplomacy and development make
13 your job as EUCOM Commander easier or more difficult?

14 General Scaparrotti: It will make the job more
15 difficult. I rely heavily on our relationships with the
16 other agencies in our government. Within my headquarters,
17 my POLAD is essentially one of my deputies, Ambassador
18 Elliott. That gives you an example of the importance we
19 place on it in EUCOM. And many of the things I have talked
20 about this morning, counter-transnational terrorism -- that
21 is predominantly agency personnel from State and Treasury.
22 It is not uniformed personnel that do those actions for
23 EUCOM in the United States and Europe.

24 Senator Warren: Thank you, General. I agree strongly
25 on this.

1 You know, Russia is actively working to destabilize
2 countries along its border and undermine unity within the
3 European Union and NATO. And they are doing this through a
4 lot of indirect tactics like enabling separatist forces and
5 disseminating propaganda and fake news. They even launched
6 a cyber attack to influence the results of our election
7 recently.

8 But Russia is also investing in other kinds of
9 asymmetric capabilities like disrupting communications
10 through electronic warfare or working to evade U.S. and NATO
11 surveillance and investing in space and cyber tools.
12 According to press reports and arms control analysis, they
13 violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty by
14 deploying ground-launched cruise missiles.

15 The European Reassurance Initiative, ERI, has helped to
16 counter some of these destabilizing activities. The United
17 States has deployed equipment and rotated forces into
18 Central and Eastern Europe, but I am wondering if this
19 standard display of force is the best way to deter Russia
20 now that Putin seems to rely more on indirect tactics.

21 So what I want to ask, General, is let us set aside
22 conventional forces and prepositioned equipment for just a
23 second, that it is there. What more can we do through ERI
24 to address Putin's indirect and asymmetric tactics?

25 General Scaparrotti: Through ERI, we are actually

1 using these funds in some of the areas for the asymmetric
2 activities to counter those malign influences. We have
3 special operations forces that are supported by this that do
4 military information support operations and activities in
5 support of U.S. Government, particularly the embassy and the
6 ambassadors in each of the countries. It supports us as
7 well in cyber in operations. In other ways, there are means
8 that perhaps -- for instance, support in naval forces are
9 seen as a ship, et cetera, but they are actually supporting
10 those capabilities and those ships support us in other ways
11 in terms of asymmetric means. So I agree with you, and we
12 do have a focus on that.

13 I would last say that part of this is we are learning
14 too. I mean, part of that effort through ERI is to make
15 sure we understand how they operate in this gray zone or
16 hybrid activity. And that is supported here as well.

17 Senator Warren: Thank you very much, General. I think
18 we need to be smart about responding to and deterring
19 Russia's asymmetric aggression. It seems to me that we
20 cannot think solely about deploying more troops and
21 conventional military assets in Europe in order to counter
22 Russia. We have got to have a very wide perspective on
23 this. Thank you.

24 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

25 Chairman McCain: Senator Wicker?

1 Senator Wicker: General, you mentioned on page 8 of
2 your testimony the ceasefire violations in Ukraine, that the
3 majority of them are being committed by Russian-led forces.
4 Senator Warren mentioned fake news. How helpful are the
5 OSCE monitors in giving us the correct picture there? And
6 then I have a couple of other questions about OSCE.

7 General Scaparrotti: Senator, thank you.

8 OSCE is very important to this. One of the issues is
9 that their job is to monitor activities and compliance with
10 the agreement on both sides of the line of contact. In
11 fact, Russia -- it is well known that they intimidate and
12 restrict the mission monitors in their job, which is one of
13 the things that we need to encourage and insist that Russia
14 stop doing and begin to allow the OSCE to do its job
15 properly.

16 Senator Wicker: What can we do in that respect?

17 General Scaparrotti: Well, I think in that respect,
18 sir, we need to bring the international community together
19 with respect to Russia and their lack of movement on the
20 Minsk. They say publicly they are in support of the Minsk
21 agreement, but personally I think if you watch their
22 actions, there does not seem to be steps taken on their part
23 to do just that.

24 Senator Wicker: They are doing a lot of exercises
25 there and in all of Europe. One of the techniques they use

1 to try to get around their commitments is the SNAP exercise
2 designation. Can you tell us about that?

3 General Scaparrotti: These exercises reflect Putin's
4 focus on his modernization. It reflects his intent to make
5 their forces more responsive to improve their mobilization,
6 but it also is a part of intimidation I would say.

7 The SNAP exercises themselves are typically broadcast
8 as much smaller than they end up being. Some of them are
9 not announced at all in contravention to the Vienna document
10 and the treaties that we have there. So that is very
11 disturbing, and it is a way that you can have
12 miscalculation. And we know in the past, at least with
13 Crimea, they have used an exercise to shield what was a
14 violation of the sovereignty of Ukraine.

15 Senator Wicker: But they also continue to do exercises
16 in Crimea. What is the significance of the most recent
17 Russian exercise in Crimea?

18 General Scaparrotti: To me the significance is that --
19 well, there are several of them. One is that they do both
20 defensive and offensive operations as a part of that SNAP
21 exercise. They rehearsed attacks on the eastern border,
22 actually flew toward it, those kinds of activities which are
23 very disturbing and create a lot of angst along the eastern
24 border and within EUCOM being able to watch this and
25 understand what is their real intent. So it is the way they

1 run the operations and without transparency that creates the
2 problem.

3 They have the right to do military exercises. They
4 need to do them in a way that is constructive and aligned
5 with our agreements.

6 Senator Wicker: But they do not have a right to do the
7 no-notice exercises under their agreements.

8 General Scaparrotti: Under the agreement, it has to be
9 announced if it is over 9,000 troops, and it has to be
10 observed if it is 13,000 or more. There has to be an
11 allowance for observers if we choose to do so. And their
12 SNAP exercises are much, much larger than that, almost
13 100,000 if you take them in all the different exercises that
14 happen simultaneously.

15 Senator Wicker: Should we be concerned about trends in
16 Russian activity in the North Atlantic?

17 General Scaparrotti: Yes, we should. They are more
18 aggressive. They are reestablishing bases in the Arctic and
19 North Atlantic. We have to go back to establishing the same
20 deterrence that we practiced during the Cold War in my view.

21 Senator Wicker: Is there a forum where we are engaging
22 with them diplomatically about that?

23 General Scaparrotti: I do not know the forum
24 personally. I know that we have engaged with them
25 diplomatically, but I could not tell you the forum, sir.

1 Senator Wicker: Thank you very much.

2 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3 Chairman McCain: Senator Hirono?

4 Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5 General, you have mentioned several times the
6 importance of the whole-of-government approach particularly
7 to reassure our NATO allies and your concern that the
8 contemplated cuts to the State Department, for example, and
9 the Treasury Department by this administration would raise
10 major concerns for you, also shared by Secretary Mattis. Is
11 that concern that you express shared by our other combatant
12 commanders?

13 General Scaparrotti: Senator, I would say that you
14 would have to ask them directly for their own personal
15 opinion, but I will answer it this way. We operate with our
16 interagency, and most of what we do today, even in the more
17 direct actions that we have taken in, say, Afghanistan or
18 Iraq have relied upon an interagency approach, a whole-of-
19 government approach. That is the way we traditionally
20 operate.

21 Senator Hirono: It sounds as though that your concern
22 or your commitment to the importance of a whole-of-
23 government approach is one that is shared by our other
24 commanders.

25 You mentioned that there is a possibility, of course,

1 of Russia's use of nuclear weapons, and there is always that
2 possibility. But on the other hand, Russia has cyber
3 capability that can be very effective, and one wonders why
4 they should resort to conventional warfare if they can use
5 cyber to do all kinds of damage. So, for example, Russia is
6 currently conducting cyber operations in various countries,
7 such as the Ukraine, Montenegro, by attacking military
8 communications and secure databases, as well as power grids.
9 In addition, they are using fake news and information
10 operations to impact elections across the globe. And this
11 has magnified a wave of populist nationalism in Europe and
12 impacted the recent U.S. elections.

13 And I think that you mentioned or you described that
14 you are working with our allies to create a defensive
15 approach to the cyber operations that Russia has deployed.

16 I am wondering, though, has the question of what the
17 U.S. would do if Russia's activities in affecting and
18 disrupting the elections of our NATO allies, whether the
19 question has come up where at some point we would say that
20 these kinds of cyber attacks rise to the level of an act of
21 war that would trigger reaction from us to support our NATO
22 allies.

23 General Scaparrotti: Senator, that is a matter of
24 policy, but I think we are a member of NATO. NATO has said
25 that Article 5 could be triggered by a cyber event. We are

1 a member of that. So I think there is the occasion that
2 that could occur. But, again, what we would do and what
3 level that would be that would create a response is a policy
4 decision.

5 Senator Hirono: Something that we need to definitely
6 discuss at the policy level.

7 I think you mentioned in response to another question
8 regarding our mil-to-mil communications with Russia that we
9 do not necessarily want to reward their bad behavior. And I
10 am wondering, based on your communication with the
11 administration, do you know what the administration's
12 position is on the current Russian sanctions? And would
13 rescinding these sanctions affect stability in Europe in
14 your view?

15 General Scaparrotti: I have not had the discussion
16 with my leadership on the sanctions, Senator. You know, I
17 think that we must retain the sanctions. We put them in
18 place as a result of their annexation of Crimea. It is
19 another way that we, both the United States and the alliance
20 in Europe, strongly show that that is unacceptable and we
21 will maintain strength in the face of Russia's activities.

22 Senator Hirono: So would any kind of cutting back on
23 those sanctions not signal some kind of a retreat or
24 weakness on the part of our U.S. commitment to NATO, for
25 example?

1 General Scaparrotti: Well, I think personally that if
2 we were to relieve or cut back on those, Putin would see
3 that as a very good thing, and it would reward him standing
4 fast long enough to perhaps survive the sanctions
5 themselves.

6 Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

7 Senator McCaskill [presiding]: I am the acting
8 chairman right now, and I have the pleasure of calling on
9 myself.

10 You know, I am going to say for the record what needs
11 to be said here, and that is that if we want to send the
12 right signal to Russia, all of the work that we are doing,
13 that you and your command are doing, which is so important,
14 is an integral piece of that. All of the work we do with
15 our allies in Europe is an integral piece of that. But a
16 big piece of it is having a commander-in-chief that will say
17 that right things to Russia. And we do not have a
18 commander-in-chief right now who is willing to say out loud
19 what everyone knows about Putin and what he is doing in
20 Europe and what he tried to do in the United States. And
21 until we have a commander-in-chief that is willing to speak
22 out against this thug and his behavior, I do not know that
23 all the great work that you and your command can do is ever
24 going to move the needle enough.

25 And I have said it, and I feel better. You do not have

1 to say a word, not your place to say a word. I understand
2 the role of the commander-in-chief in your life. But I
3 wanted to say it and put it on the record.

4 I was in Estonia. I would like to talk a little bit
5 about what is going on in other places in nontraditional
6 warfare. I was in Estonia last summer, and I was shocked
7 how many Estonians told me -- you know, we went to a coffee
8 shop and we were talking to those who spoke English. And
9 they were saying how they really wanted to be part of NATO,
10 but they were worried about the NATO soldiers being able to
11 rape the citizens of Estonia and not be held legally
12 accountable. And I, of course, went, what?

13 And as it turns out, this is the other thing Russia is
14 doing, that Russia is pushing propaganda through Estonia
15 that NATO is somehow going to damage their sovereignty in
16 terms of the enforcement of rule of law.

17 Could you speak to that, General, that method that they
18 use to try to undermine the support of NATO in the countries
19 that they have designs on?

20 General Scaparrotti: You stated it clearly. In fact,
21 we are now in NATO -- the first forces are going into the
22 four nations, Estonia being one of them. And we have
23 already had a couple of incidents of just complete untruth--
24 the incident never occurred -- within days of the troops
25 arriving. We prepared for this. We expected it. We were

1 able to respond to those truthfully and quickly and debunk
2 the false story. But it is something that I expect will
3 continue.

4 And as you said, it obviously has -- their
5 disinformation obviously has some influence. If there is a
6 consistent message from Russia in the east, it is to
7 undercut the credibility of the United States and NATO at
8 large, consistently.

9 Senator McCaskill: And do we have a robust enough
10 response to this kind of disinformation campaign? Are we
11 focusing enough on this part of the warfare?

12 General Scaparrotti: I think we are focused on it. I
13 do not think we have a robust enough response at this point.
14 I think we have to, both as the U.S. and also as allies,
15 come together and take a more aggressive confrontation of
16 Russia particularly in this gray area.

17 Senator McCaskill: Yes. I would certainly hope that
18 would be on NATO's agenda as to strategies moving forward to
19 combat this kind of insidious disinformation that really
20 does strengthen the efforts of Russia to use military might
21 to intimidate and eventually move into countries that have
22 no desire to be occupied.

23 I also want to take a brief moment to talk about
24 something I am like a broken record on and that is OCO. The
25 Congressional Research Service recently published an

1 extensive report on OCO funding, and it states the obvious
2 that those of us who are on this committee are painfully
3 aware of, that this began truly for a contingency after 9/11
4 and has now morphed into something very ugly off the books
5 in that we now have the European Reassurance Initiative in
6 the OCO budget. We now even have base budgeting in the OCO
7 budget.

8 Talk, if you will, from your perspective, as you are
9 asked to draw up your financial needs for your command, how
10 you all are making a decision inside the Pentagon what you
11 put in OCO and what you put in the base budget.

12 General Scaparrotti: Well, ma'am, for instance, I will
13 start with EUCOM. We have the outline of the use of ERI,
14 what it is intended to do based on Congress' direction. I
15 have a process where my component commands, the other
16 services, make recommendations for funding in ERI. And I
17 have a board that eventually comes to me for a decision
18 that, first of all, asks the question, is that in support of
19 the intent of ERI, and if not, why is it in here. We will
20 push it off to the base budget. Or even those areas where I
21 think, you know what, that is a broader activity we are
22 funding. It really ought to be in the base, not in ERI. So
23 I have that system myself within EUCOM, and we draw that
24 line hard because we appreciate ERI. We want to maintain
25 the credibility of it and how we use it. It is fundamental

1 to doing our job in EUCOM.

2 Within OSD, there is a very deliberate process run by
3 the DepSecDef and the Vice Chairman that all of us as
4 combatant commands take part in. And it is very detailed in
5 terms of a look at each command and what we propose for a
6 budget, what we intend to put in, and it looks at a cross
7 section, as well, a comparison of each other. So it is a
8 deliberate process.

9 I would just say that I am in favor of moving funds
10 into the base. We need predictable funding --

11 Senator McCaskill: Right.

12 General Scaparrotti: -- so that we can actually make
13 longer-term decisions and have more continuity. And that
14 would be better I think for the force as a whole as well.

15 Senator McCaskill: This would be a good time for us to
16 have the discipline, as the President has presented a budget
17 that is -- frankly, it is not a huge increase in the
18 military. I think he is trying to make everybody believe it
19 is a big increase to the military. I think it is only 3
20 percent higher than what President Obama recommended in his
21 budget. But nonetheless, it is an increase. When
22 everything else is getting cut, I think this would be a good
23 time for us to bite the bullet -- pardon the use of that
24 particular analogy, but I think it would be time for us to
25 be honest with the American people and put all of these

1 items into the base budget so the American people understand
2 what we are spending on the military as it compares to other
3 parts of our budget.

4 I thank you for your service. I thank all of the men
5 and women who serve under your command. I think you have
6 got a really important job now. I understand the importance
7 of what you do now has been exacerbated by what Russia has
8 done over the last 12 months and what they continue to do in
9 democracies across the world. And we are depending on you
10 to be our front line eyes and ears to their aggression. And
11 I thank you very much.

12 Chairman McCain [presiding]: Senator Blumenthal?

13 Senator Blumenthal: Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

14 I want to join in thanking you and the men and women
15 under your command for their service in a critical area of
16 the world for us and our national security.

17 I understand you have just come back from a trip to
18 Israel, and I would like to ask you what security concerns
19 the Israelis raised with you, focusing specifically on the
20 Iranian development, continuing development, of their
21 ballistic missiles.

22 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir. Well, first of all,
23 Israel is an extremely close ally of ours, a special ally.
24 We in EUCOM have an excellent relationship with them. It is
25 nearly daily contact. One of my missions is support of

1 Israel and their defense.

2 And so as I visited, their CHOD and I and their senior
3 leaders obviously talked about their concerns about Iranian
4 malign influence, as well as their missile capabilities. We
5 work closely with them to support and complement their
6 missile defense, for instance. And in fact, one day of that
7 trip, I met their air missile defense commander and went to
8 look at some of their sites to ensure that we in EUCOM were
9 supporting that fully.

10 Beyond that, we discussed, for instance, their concern
11 about Hezbollah and fighters gaining experience in Syria and
12 other places and returning and what that might mean in the
13 future, a concern about, obviously, Syria and the tri-border
14 region as the conflict in Syria continues. So they live in
15 a very tough neighborhood, and you can look in nearly every
16 direction and have a threat.

17 Senator Blumenthal: Is there more that we can and
18 should be doing to strengthen their defenses against that
19 kind of missile threat?

20 General Scaparrotti: Senator, we are doing all that we
21 can. I mean, we work with this closely to ensure that we
22 do, in fact, reinforce their defense. In fact, there are
23 more things we can do with their missile defense. We have
24 people there this week working on that as well. I mean, it
25 is a matter of modernization, change in environment. But we

1 are doing that. To maintain their military edge is very,
2 very important and also to maintain the war stocks that we
3 have committed to them for use.

4 Senator Blumenthal: But there is more that we can do
5 and we are doing it.

6 General Scaparrotti: We are, and we are focused on
7 support of Israel.

8 Senator Blumenthal: I take it, speaking of ballistic
9 missiles, that you would agree with General Selva who
10 testified earlier this week during the House Armed Services
11 Committee that Russia is violating the INF Treaty.

12 General Scaparrotti: Yes, I agree.

13 Senator Blumenthal: And I think in your testimony you
14 used the word "concerning." This is an extraordinarily
15 important area. Is it not?

16 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir, it is. And it is an
17 enhancement in capability that has a direct impact
18 throughout the theater from my perspective.

19 Senator Blumenthal: And that is because, as you put it
20 well in your testimony, it increases Putin's asymmetric
21 options as this missile capability is built. The whole
22 reason that the treaty exists is to stop this kind of
23 development because it threatens to destabilize the whole
24 confrontation -- not confrontation, but the array of forces
25 in that part of the world. Correct?

1 General Scaparrotti: That is correct.

2 Senator Blumenthal: Have you made recommendations as
3 to what we should be doing about it?

4 General Scaparrotti: I have made recommendations in
5 the sense that we need to respond to this. We need to be
6 strong in the face of it. And I think the actions that we
7 have recommended in EUCOM, in terms of posture, force
8 structure, et cetera, are all a part of this, a part of the
9 response that we need to have for Russia at large.

10 Senator Blumenthal: Is there consideration, to the
11 extent you may know of it, about additional diplomatic or
12 military action that the administration may be taking to
13 counter this threat to our security?

14 General Scaparrotti: At this time, I have not had that
15 discussion yet with that specific topic in terms of policy
16 actions or actions that might be taken.

17 Senator Blumenthal: Have you any expectation that that
18 discussion will occur?

19 General Scaparrotti: Yes, I do.

20 Senator Blumenthal: Can you give us a general time
21 frame?

22 General Scaparrotti: No, I cannot, but I would expect
23 we will have it. Yes, sir.

24 Senator Blumenthal: Well, I would urge that it be done
25 sooner rather than later. With all due respect, I am not

1 nearly as well informed as you, but I am extremely alarmed
2 by this violation of the INF Treaty and what it represents
3 strategically in that part of the world and what it reflects
4 in the way of Russian intentions around the world. Thank
5 you, General.

6 General Scaparrotti: Thank you, sir.

7 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 Chairman McCain: Apparently Senator King has not had
9 enough.

10 Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Fortunately,
11 your microphone was off for the editorial comment.

12 General, a couple of quick questions. Do you consider
13 RT, Russia Television, an agent of the Russian Government?

14 General Scaparrotti: Yes, I do, sir.

15 Senator King: And it is my understanding that not only
16 are they using RT in Europe, but they are also sniffing
17 around or, in fact, looking into acquisitions of commercial
18 television and radio capacity in Europe.

19 General Scaparrotti: That is correct. I have been
20 told in a number of countries that they are using fronts,
21 but essentially buying local TV, and in one case recently, a
22 social media network that is influential particularly with
23 the young in the Baltics.

24 Senator King: So when you say buying local TV, you are
25 talking about TV stations, not airtime.

1 General Scaparrotti: That is right. They are buying
2 TV stations and a social network company that does work on
3 social media.

4 Senator King: This is one more area of their what I
5 consider very effective playing of a weak hand. They are
6 aggressing upon us at a low dollar cost, but aggression
7 nonetheless.

8 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir. I agree.

9 Senator King: Different subject. Iceland. I was in
10 Iceland recently, and it struck me as an incredible
11 strategic location. Keflavik air base was dismantled -- or
12 not dismantled. It is still there, but it was deactivated
13 around 2004 or 2005. It strikes me that this is such a
14 strategic location. Do you believe that we should at least
15 consider, subject to the approval of the people of Iceland,
16 some reconstitution of our capacity there? I know we have
17 rotational forces there but something more than that.

18 General Scaparrotti: Senator, we do have rotational
19 forces through there, but I think we should consider it.
20 Again, it comes back to my concern about the high north,
21 North Atlantic, and the increasing Russian threat from the
22 North Atlantic fleet there. So that area is important to us
23 to increase our activities with our allies to ensure that we
24 deter Russia and we are very knowledgeable of their
25 activities as well.

1 Senator King: It struck me as a large, unsinkable
2 aircraft carrier in the midst of the most strategic spot in
3 the North Atlantic.

4 General Scaparrotti: Yes, sir.

5 Senator King: Thank you.

6 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 Chairman McCain: And, you know, Senator King, I met
8 with the President of Iceland, and I know that General
9 Scaparrotti has too. We have a PR challenge there as well
10 with the people of Iceland. Is that not true, General?

11 General Scaparrotti: Yes, I believe we do. I think
12 NATO could do more work there as well in terms of
13 perspective or receptiveness, Senator.

14 Chairman McCain: They would be more receptive if it
15 were a NATO kind of commitment rather than just the United
16 States.

17 General Scaparrotti: Well, in discussions, that is
18 what has been discussed with me as the SACEUR.

19 Chairman McCain: Well, I thank you, General, and I
20 appreciate, obviously, the important information you have
21 provided the committee.

22 I would just like to mention again what Senator King
23 brought up, and that is this whole issue of this information
24 warfare that is going on right now is something that crosses
25 a lot of boundaries between State and Defense and

1 intelligence and other agencies of government. And yet,
2 every time I turn around and talk particularly to one of the
3 smaller countries, that is one of their biggest issues is
4 this propaganda that the Russians -- and fake news, et
5 cetera, ranging from what their obvious attempts at changing
6 the outcome of the French election to the pressure on Latvia
7 to alienate their Russian speaking population. So I hope we
8 will move that issue up on our priority list. It seems to
9 me it is kind of like the weather. We talk about it but we
10 really do not do anything about it.

11 And there is a precedent for it. It was called the
12 Cold War. How many people do we know that after The Wall
13 came down who said I listened to Radio Free Europe? I
14 listened to the Voice of America. It kept hope alive. Why
15 can we not reconstitute something along those lines to get
16 the message out? I do not think it would be hard to counter
17 Russian propaganda given the kind of lifestyle they have in
18 Russia.

19 So I hope you will think about it, and we will continue
20 to think about it. But whenever you get one of these issues
21 that involves more than one agency of government, as you
22 know, we have much more difficulty, whether it be cyber, or
23 whether it be this information challenge that we are facing
24 now.

25 So we thank you, General, for visiting with us again

1 and thanks for the great work. Senator King will come to
2 Brussels and spend time with you as well. Thank you.

3 General Scaparrotti: Thank you, Chairman. My
4 privilege.

5 [Whereupon, at 11:35 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

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Afghan Lawmakers: Russian Support to Taliban No Secret



Amid controversy in Washington over reports that a Russian intelligence unit paid bounties to Taliban militants to kill U.S. and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan, some Afghan lawmakers say it is no secret Russia has cultivated close contacts with the Taliban and it is likely Russia has financially supported Taliban violence.

Shinkai Karokhail, a member of the Wolesi Jirga, the lower house of Afghanistan's parliament, told VOA, "It is thought that Russia has been supporting the Taliban, and it has provided the Taliban with the means so that the war, the U.S. engagement, in Afghanistan continues."

Karokhail said media reports about the Russian bounties needed to be investigated. She added, however, it is plausible that the Taliban receive

financial support from other countries in the region.



FILE- Afghan security forces take position during a gunbattle between Taliban and Afghan security forces in Laghman province, Afghanistan, March 1, 2017.

"To continue fighting, the Taliban need money, and for sure, countries such as Russia, Pakistan, Iran and others would be providing them money," she said.

Gulalai Sapi, an Afghan senator, said Russia and some other regional powers do not see their interests in the peace process in Afghanistan.

"Some countries may not want this process to be implemented as soon as possible because war in Afghanistan is in their interest," she said.

Last week, *The New York Times*, citing anonymous U.S. intelligence sources, reported that a Russian intelligence unit offered bounties to the Taliban for killing American and coalition soldiers in Afghanistan. The newspaper said U.S. President Donald Trump was briefed on the issue.

Senior U.S. intelligence officials briefed a bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers Thursday after members of Congress called for additional information on the issue.

Russia and the Taliban have rejected the allegations, and the Afghan government has declined to comment despite several requests to the country's presidential office and the national security council.

Russia-Taliban relations

Sim Tack, a military analyst with the Stratfor global intelligence firm, told VOA he was not surprised that Russian intelligence would be "trying to encourage them [the Taliban] to target coalition forces in any way."

Tack said Russia's interest is in building relations with the Taliban "as a way to ensure Russian influence in a post-U.S. Afghanistan."

He added that "if Russia is able to build a cooperative relationship with the Taliban at this point, then that definitely will help them carry a greater role in Afghanistan in the future."



FILE - Participants attend a conference on Afghanistan bringing together representatives of Afghan authorities and the Taliban in Moscow, Russia, Nov. 9, 2018.

Moscow has been in contact with the Taliban since 2015, and as part of Moscow efforts toward a political settlement in Afghanistan, it hosted a number of intra-Afghan meetings in 2019.

Jonathan Schroden, director of the Center for Stability and Development at Washington-based research and analysis organization CNA, said uncertainty about the future of Afghanistan convinced regional countries, including Russia, to build relations with the Taliban.

Schroden added that Russia and other countries in the region were considering having contacts with the Taliban "in the event that the Taliban

end up winning."

He further said these countries engage not only with the Taliban's leadership but also with the rank and file of the militant group, and "[it] probably includes some amount of support to the Taliban organization, whether that is money, guns or training."

Senior U.S. military officials in the past did not discount the notion of Russia's having ties with the Taliban.

General Joseph Votel, the then-commander of U.S. Central Command, told members of the House Armed Services Committee in March 2017 that "it is fair to assume they [Russians] may be providing some sort of support to [the Taliban], in terms of weapons or other things that may be there."

Justifications

Atiqullah Amarkhil, a retired Afghan army general, said the Russians might be thinking of revenge for the role the U.S. had in the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

"When Russians were in Afghanistan, the Americans were paying mujahedeen to fight against Russians, so it is possible that Russians, because of that, have developed relations with some Taliban groups, or a Taliban commander, so that they continue fighting."

Najeeb Nangyal, an Afghan political analyst, told VOA that Russia justifies its support to the Taliban as part of its strategy to counter the Islamic State in the region.

Daniel Davis, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel who is now a senior fellow and military expert at the Washington-based think tank Defense Priorities, said that if Russia provides support to the Taliban to counter the

Islamic State, the support can be used against the coalition forces.

"If Russians are helping the Taliban counter ISIS operation, well, obviously that help can also be used for any type of operations," Davis said.

Gul Rahman Hamdard, a member of the Wolesi Jirga, said Russia has an interest in the war in Afghanistan.

"It should be clear now to Afghans that major countries benefit [from the war in Afghanistan]," Hamdard added. "This opportunity [the peace process] should be seized and Afghans should know that this is foreigners' war."



FILE - Anatoly Antonov, Russian ambassador to the U.S., gestures while speaking during a round-table discussion on the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki in Moscow, Russia, July 20, 2018.

Russia and the peace process

Russian Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly Antonov told journalists Tuesday that Russia was working with the United States on Afghanistan. According to Russia's Tass news agency, Antonov said the countries were joining efforts "towards political settlement in Afghanistan."

The Department of Defense, in a report published in early June, said that "Russia very likely continues to support U.S.-Taliban reconciliation efforts in the hope that reconciliation will prevent a long-term U.S. military presence."

Schroden said Russia wants the U.S. to leave Afghanistan. He added that

"they do not want the U.S. peace process to be the vehicle by which the U.S. leaves."

"The ideal outcome for Russia," said Schroden, would be to revive the Moscow Process for peace. "The Moscow Process leads to a peace settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan government and then the U.S. leaves."

The U.S. military officials, however, called the Russia-led peace process in Afghanistan an attempt to undermine NATO.

Valeria Jegisman from Washington contributed to this report.

Russia accused of supplying Taliban as power shifts create strange bedfellows

An Afghan army commander is the latest to allege that Moscow is providing arms to the Islamist group that grew out of the 1980s anti-Soviet resistance

[Sune Engel Rasmussen](#)



Taliban fighters pictured at Bakwah in the western province of Farah in 2015. Taliban fighters nearly overran the provincial capital for the third time this year. Photograph: Javed Tanveer/AFP/Getty Images

Afghan officials have called on Moscow to stop supporting the [Taliban](#), as the militant group steps up attacks across the country, allegedly with the help of Russian weapons.

The plea is a sign of frustration with foreign powers, which are muscling in to fill the space left behind by the US troop drawdown and often hedging their bets on the conflict by supporting several factions – including the Taliban.

After weeks of intense battles in the western Farah province – in which Taliban fighters nearly overran the provincial capital for the third time in a year – the commander of the Afghan army's 207th Corps, [has become the latest official to point the finger at Russia](#)

"Many large countries are involved in the Afghan war. We can name Russia,

who is actively meddling in Farah, and we have seized Russian-made weapons, including night vision sniper scopes," the commander, Brig Gen Mohammad Naser Hedayat, said this week. Speaking to local television, a local police chief asked the Kabul government [to summon the Russian ambassador](#) in protest.

Russia's recent push for influence in [Afghanistan](#) follows a pattern across the region, where Moscow has challenged American influence in Libya, Turkey, Syria and the Gulf. But it also offers an echo of history for Afghans who since the 19th century have seen their country treated as a battleground for rival foreign powers.

The Taliban was originally founded on the back of the 1980s anti-Soviet resistance, but it has been forced to bury old enmities since the US-led coalition forced it from power in 2001.

Contacts began in earnest in 2005 when Moscow reached out to the Taliban to enlist its help in curtailing militants, especially those from Uzbekistan, said Waheed Muzhda, a political analyst and former Taliban official.

The exact nature of Moscow's influence remains disputed – as do its motives.

The Kremlin has long sought to curb the influence of Islamist extremists in central Asia – a region which it considers part of its historic sphere of influence. Last year, the Russian foreign ministry [admitted to sharing intelligence](#) with the Taliban to fight Isis in Afghanistan.

The offices of the Afghan president and his national security adviser declined to comment, but government officials have previously accused Russia of arming and financing the Taliban, which, [according to the US defence secretary, James Mattis](#), would be "a violation of international law".

"Somebody is supplying a bunch of Russian-type weapons, including heavy machine guns and a small number of surface-to-surface missiles," a western official said.

Javid Faisal, spokesman for the government's chief executive, Abdullah Abdullah, said the government had reports of insurgents using Russian weapons in the north and west of the country, and in the southern Uruzgan province, but added that information was scarce.

The US military in Kabul also declined to comment but its commander, Gen John W Nicholson, has in the past implied that Russia [is funnelling weapons to the Taliban](#).

Afghan officials allege that Russian intelligence helped the Taliban capture Kunduz in 2015 and 2016, shortly after Mullah Abdul Salam – one of the insurgents' "shadow governors" – travelled to Tajikistan.

According to Afghan and western officials, Russia has met several times with Taliban representatives without the knowledge of the Afghan government. Most noteworthy was a meeting last year in Iran with Taliban chief Mullah Akhtar Mansour. On his return to Pakistan, [Mansour was killed in an American drone strike](#).

Though the Taliban has long been viewed, particularly in Afghanistan, as umbilically connected to Pakistan, it has diversified its bases of support, especially since the emergence of Islamic State rallied them and various regional powers against a common enemy.

Taliban fighters in the western province of Farah.



Taliban fighters in the western province of Farah. Photograph: Javed Tanveer/AFP/Getty Images

Mansour, the late leader, restructured the Taliban's economy, giving subordinate commanders autonomy to seek out local sources of revenue – a move that may also have helped open the movement up to outside influence.

Iran, China and Saudi Arabia are all believed to be vying more attentively for influence with the Taliban, making it harder to control and to negotiate with.

Russian interference in Afghanistan is not limited to armed Islamists. Russia is also allegedly supplying weapons and cash to local strongmen in northern Afghanistan, destabilising an already fragile region.

Commanders with unpredictable allegiances and vast criminal networks from Baghlan, Kunduz, Sar-e Pol and Badakhshan have received weapons from Russia, according to a researcher with a western organisation in Kabul who is not authorised to speak to media.

The claim was confirmed by a gun smuggler who travels across the Afghan-Tajik border with caches of weapons. As an example, the smuggler said he knew of two deliveries, each of 150 Kalashnikovs, to a prominent figure in the province of Badakhshan.

Qari Abdul Wadood, police chief of Baharak district, also alleged that several militia commanders across the north had received nearly 1,000 Russian machine guns between them. Wadood warned that although the commanders receiving weapons are officially on the government payroll, their loyalties are fluid.

"Some of these people might join the Taliban, or will use the weapons for robbery and kidnappings," he said.

Russia's involvement in Afghanistan follows the example of Iran, which although formally an Afghan ally, [is padding its pro-Assad militias in Syria with Afghan Shias](#) despite protests from Kabul. Tehran has also been accused of supporting the Taliban, training and arming rebels in the western part of Afghanistan, and even allowing the group to open an office in Mashhad.

According to Muzhda, the former Taliban official, growing foreign interference is a predictable development. With Afghanistan carved up between government, militants and criminal factions, there are plenty of avenues to counter American dominance.

"When Mr Trump pressures Iran, Russia and other countries, they will try to make problems for the United States in Afghanistan," he said. "That is part of the game in Afghanistan."

Russian analyst Alexei Malashenko said claims of weapons transfers should be treated with scepticism. "What kind of weapons are we talking about? If

we are talking about Kalashnikovs or grenade launchers then this kind of thing could come from anywhere," he said.

He said, however, that it was not surprising that Russia would be dealing with some elements of the Taliban. "There are different types of Taliban, and there are some who are fighting Isis, so why shouldn't we speak to them? Without the Taliban, the Afghan state is not viable."

Additional reporting by Akhtar Mohammad Makoi in Herat

Is the tide turning? Ukraine's counteroffensive is changing the dynamic of war. Russia is on the back foot, for now at least. The sudden advance in the northeast will be good for morale in occupied Ukraine - and in the western capitals supporting Kyiv.

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Iran Allegedly Facilitating Taliban-Russia Contacts



Abdul Jabar Qahraman, who recently resigned as the top official overseeing war efforts in Afghanistan's volatile Helmand Province, has [said](#) that Iran facilitates contacts between Taliban leaders and Russian officials. In an interview with Voice of America TV (Dari Service), the former Afghan army general said he had credible intelligence that Taliban representatives from Helmand, Farah, Nimroz and Herat Provinces have traveled to Moscow via Tehran. He claimed that family members of Taliban leaders traveling to Iran have confirmed their meetings with Iranian and Russian officials. Qahraman was Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's special representative to southern Helmand Province.

Comment: Afghan and U.S. officials have repeatedly said in recent months that Iran and Russia have teamed up to undermine the U.S.-led stabilization

efforts in Afghanistan. Local officials in southern and western Afghanistan cite intelligence that shows Iran is increasingly sheltering, training, funding and arming Taliban insurgents. They claim that the two countries have not only expanded their diplomatic engagement with the Taliban leadership, but are also providing advanced weapons to the insurgents that are fighting the Afghan government and the U.S.-led coalition forces in the country. "We have received [intelligence] reports that Iran has obtained some weapons from Russia and delivered them to the Taliban. We cannot confirm it 100 percent. But intelligence reports show that the Taliban receive training inside Iran," [Afghanistan's Ariana News](#) quoted Gulbahar Mujahid, the chief security commander of Farah Province, in a report published on March 23.

Iran has also reportedly set up new training camps for Taliban fighters along Afghanistan's border and has delivered Russian arms to the insurgents in western and southern Afghan provinces. "We have received intelligence reports that training camps have been established in Iran's Naibandan area [in Khorasan], and they provide military training to the Taliban. Indeed, Russia, with Iran's assistance, is equipping the Taliban with advanced weapons," Farah's Deputy Governor Muhammad Younis Rasooli said in March.

Not all Iranian subversive activities are confined to western Afghanistan, however. Two months ago, Afghan authorities [alleged](#) that Iran had sent a delegation to meet with Taliban commanders in the restive province of Helmand. On January 23, Hayatullah Hayat, the governor of Helmand, told Afghanistan's 1TV channel that the National Directorate of Security was investigating allegations that the Iranian team also delivered weapons to Taliban militants in Helmand's Garmsir District. The timing of these reports is important as the Taliban have made significant territorial gains in Helmand Province in recent months. The insurgents yesterday [captured](#) Helmand Sangin District, a strategic area where more American and British troops

have been killed than in any other of Afghanistan's nearly 400 districts.

Both Iran and Russia have also broadened their diplomatic engagement with the Taliban leadership. Iran has hosted several Taliban delegations for talks and conferences in recent years; and in 2014, the Iranian government "formalized" its relationship with the Taliban by allowing the terrorist group to open an office in Mashhad, the capital of Iran's Khorasan-e Razavi Province. When a U.S. drone killed Taliban leader Mullah Mansur in Pakistan last year, he was [returning](#) from a trip to Iran.

Moscow, too, has cultivated close relations with the Taliban leadership – raising [concern](#) in Kabul that regional governments are directly engaging the Taliban for their own interests at the expense of Afghanistan's stability. The Trump administration [declined](#) Russia's invitation to attend a meeting with the Taliban leaders in Moscow on April 14.

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Videos suggest Russian government may be arming Taliban

Marines remaining in Afghanistan face hardship

02:55

Afghanistan, US claim Russia arming Taliban

01:21

The Taliban: How it began, and what it wants

00:50

Pence: Proud of US troops in Afghanistan

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Trump on Afghanistan plan: 'Attack we will'

02:08

The pillars of Trump's Afghanistan strategy

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Trump: US in Afghanistan to kill terrorists

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Trump calls terrorists 'losers'

01:21

Trump: Our support is not a blank check

00:45

Trump acknowledges flip-flop on Afghanistan

01:04

Trump: Love for America requires love for all

01:34

Trump: We produce a special class of heroes

02:24

Will Trump send more troops to Afghanistan?

01:25

Mattis: New Afghanistan strategy decided

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Dozens killed in Kabul car bombing

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Marines remaining in Afghanistan face hardship

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Afghanistan, US claim Russia arming Taliban

01:21

The Taliban: How it began, and what it wants

00:50

Pence: Proud of US troops in Afghanistan

Story highlights

Kabul, Afghanistan CNN — none

Two videos obtained by CNN suggest the Taliban have received improved weaponry supplied by the Russian government

NEW: Russian foreign ministry statement denies Taliban support

The Taliban have received improved weaponry in Afghanistan that appears to have been supplied by the Russian government, according to exclusive videos obtained by CNN, adding weight to accusations by Afghan and American officials that Moscow is arming their one-time foe in the war-torn country.

US generals first suggested they were concerned the Russian government was seeking to arm the Afghan insurgents back in April, but images from the battlefield here corroborating these claims have been hard to come by.

These two videos show sniper rifles, Kalashnikov variants and heavy machine guns that weapons experts say are stripped of any means of identifying their origin.

Two separate sets of Taliban, one in the north and another in the west, claim to be in possession of the weapons, which they say were originally supplied by Russian government sources. One splinter group of Taliban near Herat say they obtained the guns after defeating a mainstream rival group of Taliban. Another group say they got the weapons for free across the border with Tajikistan and that they were provided by "the Russians."

The videos don't provide incontrovertible proof of the trade, of which Moscow has categorically denied involvement. Yet they offer some of the first battlefield evidence of a flow of weapons that has the Afghan and American governments deeply concerned about Moscow's intentions here.

"The Russians have said that they maintain contact with the Taliban, we have lots of other reports from other people they are arming the Taliban ... there is no smoke without fire," Afghan government spokesman Sediq Sediqi said. "That's why our intelligence agencies are up to the job to find out what level of support that is to the Taliban."

Another Afghan official said they were sure that trade was happening between Russia and the Taliban.

On Wednesday, [Russia's foreign ministry said in a statement](#):

"As we have repeatedly stated, the accusations of a number of Western and some Afghan mass media ... regarding alleged Russia's support of the Taliban militants, are groundless. To date, neither the Afghan authorities nor the command of the US and NATO contingents in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan have provided evidence that would confirm these speculations."

"Again, we emphasize: Russia does not support the Taliban movement."

The ministry had earlier declined to comment for this article.

US officials have long voiced concerns about any weapons flow to the terror group. Asked in April whether he would refute the reports Russia was arming the Taliban, the US commander here, Gen. John Nicholson, said: "Oh, no I'm not refuting that... Arming belligerents or legitimizing belligerents who perpetuate attacks ... is not the best way forward."

Gen. Joseph Votel, chief of US Central Command, told a congressional

committee in March he believed the Russians were seeking influence in Afghanistan.

"I think it is fair to assume they may be providing some sort of support to (the Taliban) in terms of weapons or other things that may be there," he said.

In one video the Herat group are seen brandishing the guns, which they said were taken from the mainstream Taliban, led by Mullah Haibatullah, after that group attacked them. Eighteen of their rivals were killed in the attack and six were captured, they said.

"These weapons were given to the fighters of Mullah Haibatullah by the Russians via Iran," said their deputy leader, Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi. He went on to repeat the often-heard rationale behind the arming – which Moscow denies – that the weapons were supplied to help the Taliban better fight ISIS.

"The Russians are giving them these weapons to fight ISIS in Afghanistan, but they are using them against us too," he said.

The second video was shot nearer Kabul and features a masked Taliban fighter parading arms he says he obtained through the northern province of Kunduz. He said he did not pay for the weapons – insurgents often pay for guns with opium crops – and that his group received the guns via the Tajik border.

"These pistols have been brought to us recently," he says. "These are made in Russia, and are very good stuff."

Weapons experts from the Small Arms Survey studied the videos and said there was little in them to directly tie the guns to the Russian state. The weapons were not particularly modern or rare, and even some of the more

elaborate additions, like a JGBG M7 scope on one machine gun, were Chinese made and readily available online, they said.

Yet Benjamin King from the Survey said, "the weapons didn't seem to have the manufacturer markings where we would expect them." He said that elsewhere there have been reports of supplying governments and others going to great lengths to remove identification markings from weapons.

"If this is a pattern seen in Afghanistan then it would be noteworthy," he added.

Seddiqi, the Afghan government spokesman, said they had put the allegations to Moscow and also received a denial. He added Afghan officials have expressed their concerns about Moscow's contacts with the Taliban, which coalition officials say legitimizes the insurgency.

"The issue of contact with the Taliban with the Russians was something that really concerned us as well," Seddiqi said. "No contact with non-state groups."

Update: This story includes a new statement from Russia's foreign ministry. The ministry had previously declined to comment for this article.



Russia seems to be trying to undermine the Afghan army as part of a proxy war against the US and its allies

PARWIZ/REUTERS

Russia funds Taliban in war against Nato forces

Anthony Loyd, Kabul

Monday October 16 2017, 12:01am BST, The Times

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Russia is funding Taliban military operations against Nato in Afghanistan through a covert programme of laundered fuel sales, *The Times* has learnt from members of the Islamist group and Afghan officials.

Russian intelligence services are sending fleets of fuel tankers into Afghanistan through the Hairatan border crossing with

Uzbekistan. From there, they are delivered free of charge to front companies operating on behalf of the Taliban. The arrangement allows about \$2.5 million raised in cash from the sale of the fuel each month to be delivered directly to insurgent paymasters.

Russia has accelerated its support in recent months in an apparent attempt to bolster the Taliban against Islamic State. The trade has become part of the revived “proxy war” strategy against the US and its allies, which stretches across battlefields from Ukraine to Syria.

“We sell the fuel on and distribute the money directly to our commanders,” a Taliban treasurer from Ghazni province said. He had been authorised to speak to a journalist as part of the Taliban’s efforts to advertise its relationship with international backers, in response to President Trump’s decision in August to send 3,800 additional US troops and further funding to the Afghan government.

“Accepting money from the Russians is not something we like doing,” the Taliban treasurer said, “but it is necessary at this stage of our jihad.”

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Moscow has been repeatedly accused by senior US officials of supporting the Taliban. “Russia does supply arms to the Taliban, and this, of course, is a violation of international norms and violation of the norms of the UN security council,” Rex Tillerson, the US secretary of state, said recently.

Yet the meetings with *The Times* were the first time the Taliban had publicly admitted to receiving Russian support. Nato has more than 13,000 troops still in Afghanistan, including up to 500 British soldiers, as part of Operation Resolute Support, which trains, advises and assists the Afghan government.

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Russian cash goes straight into the hands of Taliban chiefs

October 16 2017, 12:01am BST

Anthony Loyd, Kabul

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COMMENTARY

Russia Defines Its Post-Takeover Role in the Afghan Conflict

Ivan U Klyszcz

2 September 2021

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Russia looks to the Taliban as a stabilising force in Afghanistan – and this may mean formal recognition of the new regime in the country.

During the farewell meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Moscow last month, Putin spoke in public about the Taliban takeover for the first time. He stated that the world needs to proceed in Afghanistan from the reality

WRITTEN BY

Ivan U Klyszcz

that the Taliban have become the authorities of the country, and that it should **refrain** from continuing to try to impose its values on Afghanistan.

These comments do not represent a departure from Russia's broader Afghanistan **policy**, which remains focused on protecting Central Asia from the 'instability' of the Afghan civil war. They do, however, indicate what role Moscow is going to take at the current Afghan juncture – namely, that of a **pragmatic facilitator** for the Taliban's consolidation. In other words, Russia is **betting** on a stable Taliban rule to bring long-term stability in Afghanistan. For the Taliban, a partnership with Russia would **help** them avoid international isolation. So, there is a degree of overlap between Russia's interests and those of the Taliban.

Russia is not alone in this outlook. The international community has reacted differently to the Taliban takeover today than in the 1990s. Since 15 August, the West has adopted a **wait-and-see** approach,

especially concerning the Taliban's way of governing and their relationship with transnational terrorist networks. In this sense, the preference in many capitals is to see the Taliban become a predictable actor outside of Afghanistan's borders, bound to the agreements signed in the last few years. Moscow, for its part, hopes that its conciliatory and pragmatic approach to the Taliban will result in making inroads with the group. This would help turn Moscow into a key player in the resolution of the conflict. To attain this goal, Moscow has several instruments, but it faces some obstacles.

Regarding the obstacles, the issue of formal recognition looms large. On the one hand, Russia is not keen to be the first state to recognise the Taliban, as it still legally considers the organisation a terrorist group. Moreover, the Russian government has cultivated a reputation of being a fighter against terrorism, so rushing to recognition would harm this narrative. On the other hand, top authorities in Russia have spoken about

the Taliban as an **inevitable** partner for Russia, with some even suggesting the need to ‘legalise’ the Taliban.

Legal recognition of Taliban rule would enable Russia to have a wider scope of contacts with the group. Yet, there are many legal hurdles to changing the terrorist designation. The status was set out in federal law in 2003 and it is **bound** to the terrorist status of other groups, including some operating in Russia itself. Because of this, Russia hopes for a Security Council resolution lifting the UN sanctions against the Taliban. This would facilitate the change in Russia’s own designation of the Taliban and pave the way to recognition.

The legal dimension, however, does not impede continued Russian engagement with the Taliban. Regarding instruments, Russia has developed reliable channels of communication with the Taliban since at least 2015. These channels are manned by top diplomats on both sides. Putin’s Afghanistan envoy, **Zamir Kabulov**, is a well-

established Afghanistan expert who famously met Mullah Omar in 1995. The Taliban's top leadership has visited Russia several times for Moscow-sponsored talks.

Under the conditions following the fall of Kabul, these diplomatic instruments can help the Taliban consolidate power by facilitating dialogue that does not challenge their rule. On 19 August, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, stated that Moscow is ready to restart talks between the Taliban and the anti-Taliban resistance. Tellingly, these are proposed only once the Taliban choose a new leadership for the country. Russia's interest in the Taliban's consolidation is also at play in its calls for dialogue between the de facto Taliban government and the opposition.

The topic of recognition has rightfully captured much attention, as it will determine Afghanistan policy in many capitals. Yet, for Russia, recognition will not change the role it has adopted at the current juncture. Putin's 20 August

comments point to Russia's de facto recognition of the Taliban as Russia's legitimate Afghan counterpart and as the guarantors of Afghanistan's stability. So, Russia's dialogue and mediation initiatives are not meant to challenge the premise of Taliban rule. In turn, the instruments for attaining Moscow's goals regarding the Taliban did not depend on the Taliban's legal status, nor will they do so now after the takeover.

The views expressed in this Commentary are the author's, and do not represent those of RUSI or any other institution.

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WRITTEN BY

Ivan U Klyszcz

Russia hands over Afghan embassy in Moscow to the Taliban, Islamic flag is raised

Apr 12, 2022 12:00 pm By [Christine Douglass-Williams](#)

Russia's move gives legitimacy to the Taliban, but India's Rakesh Sood is correct that the most important endorsement the Taliban needs is from the West, since it wants Western money. But Sood observes that "their actions on girls' education have further restricted that option."

It isn't only girls' education that's the problem. The Taliban has always been and will always be a brutal jihad group which abuses women and minorities, launches indiscriminate attacks on civilians, and murders those whom it believes to have violated various Sharia provisions. Its objective is to rule the region by Sharia, using fear and force.

"Afghan embassy in Moscow handed over to Taliban, flag hoisted," by Nayanima Basu, [The Print](#), April 10, 2022:

New Delhi: In the midst of constricting sanctions and increasing isolation by the West for its invasion of Ukraine, Russia on Saturday completed the official handover of the Afghanistan embassy in Moscow to the Taliban. Jamal Garwal who was accredited in late March 2022 as Charge d'Affaires in Afghanistan Embassy in Moscow took charge and the Islamist group's flag was hoisted inside the mission premises.

"Today, the Afghan Embassy in Moscow was handed over to an IEA-appointed diplomat. The MoFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) of IEA (Islamic Emirates Arabic) expresses gratitude to the government of the Russian

Federation for accrediting the Afghan diplomat and facilitating the role of the Afghan Embassy in ensuring bilateral relations and providing timely services to its citizens in Russia", said Abdul Qahar Balkhi, spokesperson, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan.

Balkhi also said, "As the legitimate government of Afghanistan, the IEA is entitled to managing Afghan political missions abroad and engaging responsibly with the world."...

"We do not rule out that Kabul may send several junior and middle-level diplomats to reinforce the staff of the Afghan embassy in Moscow. Some of its diplomats, as we have heard, have already quit their jobs and even left Russia," Kabulov said....

"We are convinced that the international community should actively cooperate with Afghanistan's new government, encouraging steps aimed at its official recognition by the UN and all its participants," Lavrov said in that meeting which was attended by Taliban's acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi....

While Moscow has officially accredited that Taliban diplomat, Russia's Foreign Ministry has said this cannot be considered as "official recognition" of the regime.

"It would be premature to talk about recognising the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. However, I must note that the regime change in Kabul has not signalled any pause in the diplomatic contacts between our countries. We had contact with the Taliban movement even before it came to power. It is business as usual for the Russian Embassy in Afghanistan, while the members of the Afghan diplomatic mission in Moscow were appointed by the previous government," Maria Zakharova, spokesperson, Russian Foreign Ministry said last week....

However, according to Rakesh Sood, former Indian envoy to Afghanistan, the Taliban will have to ultimately "seek recognition from the West as that's where the money will come from. Their actions on girls' education have further restricted that option. The timing, however, of the step taken by Russia is only a reflection of its growing differences with the West."...

Russia Latest Country to Establish Diplomatic Ties With Taliban

[John Pike](#)

[In-Depth Coverage](#)

By VOA News April 09, 2022

Their government still unrecognized by any country in the world, Afghanistan's ruling Taliban have found a way to beat international isolation: opening diplomatic ties with neighboring countries and others, with an eye to gaining formal recognition.

In recent months, at least four countries — China, Pakistan, Russia and Turkmenistan — have accredited Taliban-appointed diplomats, even though all have refused to recognize the 8-month-old government in Afghanistan.

Last month, Russia became the latest country to establish diplomatic ties with the Taliban when its Foreign Ministry accredited Taliban diplomat Jamal Nasir Gharwal as Afghan charge d'affaires in Moscow.

"We regard this as a step towards the resumption of full-

fledged diplomatic contacts," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said Wednesday.

On Saturday, Gharwal took over the embassy, Taliban foreign ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi tweeted. Although Zakharova said it was premature "to talk about official recognition of the Taliban," the move is not sitting well in Washington, where officials are concerned it could confer undeserved legitimacy on the Taliban.

A State Department spokesperson said the U.S. and its allies "remain deeply troubled by recent steps the Taliban have taken, including steps to restrict education and travel for girls and women."

"Now is not the time to take any steps to lend credibility to the Taliban or normalize relations," the spokesperson said in response to a query from VOA. "This move sends the wrong signal to the Taliban."

In the wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan last August, the U.S. and other Western countries shut down their diplomatic posts in Kabul. But they've maintained contact with the group, if only to facilitate the flow of humanitarian aid into the country and influence Taliban policies.

The countries that have received Taliban diplomats all

maintain embassies in Afghanistan.

Ronald Neumann, a former U.S. ambassador to Kabul and the president of the American Academy of Diplomacy, said it was a "mistake" for Russia and other nations to accredit Taliban diplomats while the international community seeks cooperation from the Taliban on a number of fronts.

"When they accredit the diplomats, then they weaken the influence of the pressure that says you have to allow girls' education and you have to cooperate with the NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) to help feed people or you won't get recognition," Neumann said. "So what the Taliban will see is that if they pay no attention to those statements, some states will begin to move toward recognition anyway."

Accrediting a foreign diplomat is not the same as giving formal recognition, Neumann said. But that's not how the Taliban see it.

"In practice, this is the equivalent of recognition, but it is not enough," said Suhail Shaheen, who has been appointed by the Taliban to serve as Afghanistan's envoy to the U.N.

"Countries must recognize the Islamic Emirate."

Shaheen, whose appointment has not been endorsed by the U.N., told VOA that about 10 countries have "accepted" Taliban diplomats, including China, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan,

Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan.

Of those, only four " China, Pakistan, Russia and Turkmenistan " have formally accredited diplomats appointed by the Taliban, according to announcements by Afghan embassies and the foreign ministries of the host countries.

But previously appointed diplomats at Afghanistan's embassies in Iran, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia now follow the Taliban foreign ministry's "instructions," Shaheen said.

"We don't have any problem with anyone who contacts the current government of the Islamic Emirate and follows its instructions," Shaheen said via WhatsApp. "That's what they've done."

Abdul Qayyum Sulaimani, the Afghan charge d'affaires in Tehran and a holdover from the previous government, told reporters in January that he'd received a letter from Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban foreign minister, confirming his status as acting ambassador.

Representatives of the Afghan embassies in Kuala Lumpur and Riyadh could not be reached for comment.

Qatar is a "special case," Neumann said. The Gulf state has long allowed the Taliban to operate a political office in Doha, and it represents some U.S. diplomatic interests in

Afghanistan. In November, Muttaqi met with Afghan embassy staff in Doha.

The Qatar Embassy in Washington did not respond to a question about whether the Qatari government had accredited any Taliban diplomats.

Afghanistan maintains 45 embassies and 20 consulates around the world. The majority are still run by diplomats appointed by the government of former President Ashraf Ghani and have refused to work with the Taliban government.

Mohammad Zahir Aghbar, Afghanistan's ambassador to Tajikistan, said Taliban pressure to oust Afghan diplomats won't work.

"No country will let them do that," Aghbar told VOA's Afghan Service.

Tajikistan, which maintains close ties to an anti-Taliban resistance group, is the only Afghanistan neighbor that has refused to allow Taliban officials to visit the Afghan Embassy.

Last week, a senior Taliban foreign ministry official visited an Afghan consulate in neighboring Uzbekistan "to improve and organize the consular affairs of the Afghan consulate" in the border town of Termez, according to a Taliban official.

Last month, Afghanistan's embassy in Washington and its consulates in New York and Los Angeles shut down after running out of money.

Senior State Department Correspondent Cindy Saine and VOA Afghan Service's Mirwais Rahmani contributed to this article.

NEWSLETTER
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Taliban officials nearing contract for purchase of gasoline from Russia

By and



KABUL, Aug 29 (Reuters) - The Taliban administration is in the final stages of talks in Moscow over the terms of a contract for Afghanistan to purchase gasoline and benzene from Russia, Afghan officials told Reuters.

Habiburahman Habib, the spokesperson for Afghanistan's

Ministry of Economy confirmed that an official delegation chaired by the commerce ministry was in the Russian capital and finalising contracts for supplies of wheat, gas and oil.

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"They are in negotiation with the Russian side," he said in a message to Reuters, adding they would share details once the contracts were complete.

A source from the office of the Minister of Commerce and Industry told Reuters technical officials from his ministry and the Ministry of Finance had stayed in Moscow to work on the contracts after a ministerial delegation visited this month.

"We are working on text of contract, (we have) almost agreed on gasoline and benzene," said the official, adding they expected it to be finished soon.

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Spokespeople at Russia's foreign and energy ministries did not respond to requests for comment.

The contracts come after a Taliban delegation led by the acting commerce minister visited Russia in mid-August to hold talks on trade.

If completed, the contract would be a sign of foreign

countries increasingly doing business with the Taliban, despite its administration not being officially recognised by any international government since it took control of the country after U.S. troops withdrew around a year ago.

Advertisement · Scroll to continue

It comes as the United States tries to convince other nations to cut down on use of Russian oil, saying the initiative is aimed at curbing the oil revenue that Moscow uses to finance its invasion of Ukraine.

Both Russia and Taliban-led Afghanistan face economic sanctions from international governments, including the United States.

No foreign government, including Moscow, formally recognises the Taliban administration and Afghanistan's banks have been hampered by the sanctions which have left most international banks unwilling to carry out transactions with Afghan banks.

The official source said they had a plan for how payments would be made but declined to provide details on whether official banking channels would be used.

Despite Afghanistan's central bank assets being frozen, its banking sector hampered by sanctions, and a lack of formal recognition from abroad, some countries are doing business

with Kabul, helping it access global markets amid a domestic economic crisis.

Pakistan is receiving thousands of tonnes of coal from Afghanistan a day, which the former has welcomed to ease its energy crisis. Transactions are carried out by private businesses in each country, and the Taliban administration collects millions of dollars in customs duties on the coal exports.

(This story corrects designation of Afghan spokesperson to economy ministry, not commerce ministry)

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Reporting by Charlotte Greenfield and Mohammad Yunus Yawar; Editing by Hugh Lawson

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BANKING AND FINANCIAL NEWS MAY 12, 2015 / 1:47 PM / UPDATED 7 YEARS AGO

Accused Russian spy's U.S. legal fees paid by Moscow-owned bank

By Joseph Ax

3 MIN READ



NEW YORK, May 12 (Reuters) - A state-owned Russian bank is paying for the legal defense of an employee charged with posing as a banker in New York while secretly spying for Moscow, his lawyer confirmed on Tuesday.

Evgeny Buryakov and two other Russian citizens, Igor Sporyshev and Victor Podobnyy, are accused of conspiring to gather economic intelligence on behalf of Russia, including information about U.S. sanctions against the country, and to recruit New York City residents as intelligence sources.

Buryakov's lawyer, Scott Hershman of the firm White & Case, told U.S. District Judge Richard Berman that his firm had signed a retainer agreement with Buryakov's employer, state-owned Vnesheconombank.

Federal prosecutors had raised the possibility that permitting a third party to finance Buryakov's defense could pose a conflict of interest. Berman said he would hold a hearing on Monday, May 18, to explore whether a potential conflict exists.

Vnesheconombank's decision to fund Buryakov's defense comes after the Russian foreign ministry called on the United States to release him, saying prosecutors had not provided evidence to support the allegations.

Buryakov has pleaded not guilty to charges of conspiracy and acting as an unregistered agent of Russia.

A Vnesheconombank representative in New York referred questions to the company's press office in Moscow, which could not be reached outside of regular business hours there.

Prosecutors have said Buryakov engaged in covert work for Russia's foreign intelligence service, known as the SVR, while posing as a banker at Vnesheconombank in New York. He remains listed on the company's website as a deputy representative for its New York branch.

Sporyshev was formerly a Russian trade representative from 2010 to 2014, while Podobnyy worked as an attaché to Russia's United Nations mission from 2012 to 2013, according to U.S. authorities.

Both no longer live in the United States and have not been arrested. Prosecutors have said the two men enjoyed diplomatic immunity while working in New York.

Buryakov met with Sporyshev on dozens of occasions between 2012 and 2014 to exchange information related to their work as agents for SVR, according to prosecutors. Buryakov also traveled to another country in November 2012 and March 2013 to gather additional economic intelligence for SVR, prosecutors said. (Reporting by Joseph Ax; Editing by Dan Grebler)

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US deports Russian spy who posed as VEB bank employee

Evgeny Buryakov was part of a spy ring which had contact with former Trump adviser Carter Page.

[Tom Porter](#) 04/06/17 AT 6:01 PM



Evgeny Buryakov, a former New York banker who was convicted in federal court of conspiring to act in the United States as an agent of the Russian Federation, is shown in this handout photo sitting on a commercial flight, escorted by deportation officers and turned over to Russian authorities, Reuters Pics

On 5 April, the US deported a Russian spy who had been posing as a bank employee in New York and was part of an espionage ring which had contact with a former adviser to Donald Trump.

Evgeny Buryakov, 42, was sent to Russia on commercial flights, escorted by deportation officers and turned over to Russian authorities, US Immigration

and Customs and Enforcement (ICE) said in a statement.

[Buryakov worked for several years as an agent of Russia's foreign intelligence agency, the SVR, according to the ICE and court documents.](#) He worked in the US under non-official cover, meaning he posed as a private citizen, working in a branch of Russian bank Vnesheconombank (VEB) in New York.

He was arrested in 2015, and pleaded guilty to having worked as an agent for Russia without declaring his status to the Attorney General, as legally required.

Buryakov was released from prison and briefly taken into ICE custody, and placed on an Aeroflot plane. A Russian embassy spokesman confirmed to CBS News that Buryakov had arrived in Moscow.

Buryakov was part of a Russian spy ring that included two officials at Russian government agencies in the US.

According to court documents one of the men, Viktor Podobnyy, [had contact with former Trump spokesman Carter Page in 2013.](#)

Page has confirmed that he provided Podobnyy with information on the energy industry, but said the information was not sensitive and he had no idea the men were intelligence agents.

BLOCKING MAJOR RUSSIAN FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

OFAC designated two financial institutions that are crucial to financing the Russian defense industry, as well as 42 of their subsidiaries. These financial institutions play significant roles in the Russian economy, holding combined assets worth tens of billions of dollars.

VEB and PSB are state-owned institutions that play specific roles to prop up Russia's defense capability and its economy. VEB's \$53 billion asset portfolio makes it large enough to be among Russia's top five financial institutions. VEB occupies a unique role in Russia's financial system as the servicer of Russia's sovereign debt, financier for exports, and a funding source for investment projects with a loan portfolio of over \$20 billion. VEB finances Russia's national economic development, including large-scale projects to develop domestic infrastructure and other industries that are critical to Russia's generation of revenue. Currently Russia's 8th largest bank, PSB was earmarked by the Russian government to finance Russia's Ministry of Defense and the Russian defense sector. It services nearly 70 percent of Russia's defense contracts and provides banking and personal finance to Russian military personnel. Today's designation of PSB exposes the Russian government's scheme to minimize sanctions risk exposure through PSB's illicit sanctions evasion activity.

State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank (VEB) finances domestic development projects as Russia's national economic development institution. In partnership with commercial banks, VEB provides financing for large-scale projects to develop the country's infrastructure and industrial production. VEB was designated pursuant to E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, the Government of Russia (GoR), and for operating or having operated in the

financial services sector of the Russian Federation economy.

In addition, 25 of VEB's subsidiaries were designated today pursuant to E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, VEB or the GoR. These subsidiaries represent a wide range of businesses, including banks and other financial firms, electronic component producers, a coal mining company, a sporting activities company, among others, in Russia and three other countries. All entities owned 50 percent or more, directly or indirectly, by VEB are subject to blocking under E.O. 14024, even if not identified on OFAC's Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List). Prior to today's action, VEB and any entity owned 50 percent or more by VEB were subject to certain debt- and equity-related restrictions pursuant to Directive 1 under E.O. 13662. These entities are now blocked.

OFAC issued general licenses authorizing certain transactions related to the wind-down of transactions involving VEB, as well as VEB's servicing of sovereign debt.

Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company (PSB) is deemed by the GoR as a systemically important Russian state-owned financial institution and is Russia's eighth largest financial institution. The GoR nationalized PSB in 2018 and repurposed it to finance the defense industry and service large defense contracts as part of a scheme to assist the government in avoiding new sanctions. Since its transformation into the Russian state defense bank, PSB has issued billions of dollars in financial support for Russian defense sector companies, and it currently services nearly 70 percent of state contracts signed by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). In addition to supporting the MoD and Russian defense enterprises, PSB provides its banking products, including mortgages, to Russian military personnel. In an effort to insulate itself from U.S. sanctions, the GoR has also tasked PSB with

providing credit to entities under U.S. and partner nations' sanctions so that other lenders, namely Sberbank and VTB Bank, can offload the risk of conducting business with sanctioned entities. PSB is reported to be creating a separate currency exchange to service companies targeted by Western sanctions.

PSB was designated for operating or having operated in the defense and related materiel and financial services sectors of the Russian Federation economy. In addition to PSB itself, 17 of its subsidiaries were designated today pursuant to E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, PSB. The 17 blocked subsidiaries, all of which are located in Russia, include a variety of companies including financial, technology, and real estate-related entities. All entities owned 50 percent or more, directly or indirectly, by PSB are subject to blocking under E.O. 14024, even if not identified on OFAC's SDN List.

As part of the designation of PSB, OFAC also took action against five vessels that are owned by PSB Lizing OOO, a designated subsidiary of PSB. All five vessels were identified pursuant to E.O. 14024 as blocked property in which PSB Lizing OOO has an interest.

1. **Baltic Leader** (IMO: 9220639), a Russian-flagged roll-on roll-off cargo vessel with a gross registered tonnage of 8831;
2. **Linda** (IMO: 9256858), a Russian-flagged crude oil tanker with a gross registered tonnage of 61991;
3. **Pegas** (IMO: 9256860), a Russian-flagged crude oil tanker with a gross registered tonnage of 61991;
4. **Fesco Magadan** (IMO: 9287699), a Russian-flagged container ship with a gross registered tonnage of 7519; and
5. **Fesco Moneron** (IMO: 9277412), a Russian-flagged container ship with

a gross registered tonnage of 7519.

TARGETING ELITES AND FAMILIES CLOSE TO PUTIN

Elites close to Putin continue to leverage their proximity to the Russian President to pillage the Russian state, enrich themselves, and elevate their family members into some of the highest positions of power in the country at the expense of the Russian people. Sanctioned oligarchs have used family members to move assets and to conceal their immense wealth. The following designations target powerful Russians in Putin's inner circle believed to be participating in the Russian regime's kleptocracy and their family members.

Denis Aleksandrovich Bortnikov, son of **Aleksandr Vasilievich Bortnikov**

Aleksandr Vasilievich Bortnikov (Aleksandr Bortnikov) is the Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of the Russian Federation and a permanent member of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Aleksandr Bortnikov was previously designated in March 2021 for being an official of the GoR, and for acting or purporting to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, the FSB. Aleksandr Bortnikov's son, Denis Aleksandrovich Bortnikov (Denis Bortnikov), is currently a Deputy President of Russian-state owned financial institution VTB Bank Public Joint Stock Company (VTB Bank) and a Chairman of the VTB Bank Management Board.

Today, OFAC redesignated Aleksandr Bortnikov and designated his son Denis Bortnikov pursuant to E.O. 14024 for being or having been leaders, officials, senior executive officers, or members of the board of directors of the GoR. Denis Bortnikov was also designated pursuant to E.O. 14024 for being the spouse or adult child of Aleksandr Bortnikov, a person whose property or interests in property are blocked for being or having been a leader, official, senior executive officer, or member of the board of directors

of the GoR.

Petr Mikhailovich Fradkov (Petr Fradkov) is the Chairman and CEO of PSB. Petr Fradkov is also the son of Mikhail Efimovich Fradkov (Mikhail Fradkov), former Prime Minister of Russia and former Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Mikhail Fradkov was designated by OFAC in April 2018 for being an official of the GoR. Since 2018, Petr Fradkov has worked to transform PSB into a bank that services the defense industry and supports state defense contracts. In his role as Chairman and CEO of PSB, Petr Fradkov has held working meetings with Putin and participated in roundtable discussions in international forums in which he forecasts the PSB's long-term strategic plans for supporting the Russian defense industry. Petr Fradkov is also the General Director of Joint Stock Company Russian Export Center, which was blocked today as a subsidiary of VEB.

Today, Petr Fradkov was designated pursuant to E.O. 14024 for operating or having operated in the defense and related materiel and financial services sectors of the Russian Federation economy.

Vladimir Sergeevich Kiriienko, son of **Sergei Vladilenovich Kiriienko**

Sergei Vladilenovich Kiriienko (Sergei Kiriienko) is the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Office. Sergei Kiriienko is reported to be Putin's domestic policy curator. Previously, Sergei Kiriienko served as the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation and as the General Director of Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation. Sergei Kiriienko was previously designated in March 2021 for being an official of the GoR. Sergei Kiriienko's son, Vladimir Sergeevich Kiriienko (Vladimir Kiriienko), previously worked as a vice president at the Russian state-controlled company, Rostelecom, and is presently the CEO of VK Group, the parent company of Russia's top social media platform, VKontakte.

Today, OFAC redesignated Sergei Kiriienko and designated his son Vladimir Kiriienko pursuant to E.O. 14024 for being or having been leaders, officials, senior executive officers, or members of the board of directors of the GoR. Vladimir Kiriienko was also designated pursuant to E.O. 14024 for being the spouse or adult child of Sergei Kiriienko, a person whose property or interests in property are blocked for being or having been a leader, official, senior executive officer, or member of the board of directors of the GoR.

As a result of today's blocking actions, all property and interests in property of persons mentioned above that are in the United States or in the possession or control of U.S. persons are blocked and must be reported to OFAC. In addition, any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, individually or in the aggregate, 50 percent or more by one or more blocked persons are also blocked. Unless authorized by a general or specific license issued by OFAC, or exempt, all transactions by U.S. persons or within (or transiting) the United States that involve any property or interests in property of blocked persons are generally prohibited. The prohibitions include the making of any contribution or provision of funds, goods, or services by, to, or for the benefit of any blocked person, or the receipt of any contribution or provision of funds, goods, or services from any such person. In addition, financial institutions and other persons that engage in certain transactions or activities with the sanctioned individuals may be subject to an enforcement action.

SOVEREIGN DEBT RESTRICTIONS

As a part of today's actions, OFAC also increased restrictions on dealings in Russia's sovereign debt, further cutting Russia off from sources of revenue to fund its government or President Putin's priorities, including his further invasion into Ukraine. These restrictions significantly cut off a core way for Russia to raise money. This kind of measure creates a strain on resources for

the Russian state and greater risk for its ability to manage its finances.

Specifically, OFAC issued Russia-related Directive 1A under E.O. 14024, "Prohibitions Related to Certain Sovereign Debt of the Russian Federation" (the "Russia-related Sovereign Debt Directive"), amending and superseding Directive 1 under E.O. 14024. This extends existing sovereign debt prohibitions to cover participation in the secondary market for bonds issued after March 1, 2022 by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the National Wealth Fund of the Russian Federation, or the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation.

[For identifying information on the individuals and entities sanctioned today.](#)

[General License 2](#), [General License 3](#), [New FAQs](#), and [Updated FAQs](#).

###

Subsidiaries of Russian Financial Institutions Sanctioned on February 22, 2022 Pursuant to E.O. 14024

The property and interests in property of the following VEB subsidiaries are blocked:

1. **Bank BELVEB OJSC** is a bank located in Belarus.
2. **VEB Leasing OJSC** is a leasing company located in Russia.
3. **Prominvestbank** is a bank located in Ukraine.
4. **VEB Capital** is a financial company located in Russia.
5. **VEB Engineering LLC** is an investment project implementation services company located in Russia.
6. **JSC Infraveb** is an investment project support company located in Russia.
7. **JSC VEB.DV** is an investment project support company located in

Russia.

8. **VEB Asia Limited** is a financial company located in Hong Kong.
9. **LLC Infrastructure Molzhaninovo** is an electric energy company located in Russia.
10. **LLC Resort Zolotoe Koltso** is a real estate and construction company located in Russia.
11. **JSC Russian Export Center** is an export-related company located in Russia.
12. **LLC VEB Ventures** is a financial company located in Russia.
13. **LLC VEB Service** is a business and management advisory company located in Russia.
14. **LLC Special Organization for Project Finance Factory of Project Finance** is a financial company located in Russia.
15. **LLC SIBUGLEMET Group** is a coal mining company located in Russia.
16. **JSC ANGSTREM-T** is a technology company located in Russia.
17. **LLC NM-TEKH** is a technology company located in Russia.
18. **JSC SLAVA** is a real estate company located in Russia.
19. **JSC PFC CSKA** is a sporting activities company located in Russia.
20. **LLC Torgovy Kvartal-Novosibirsk** is a property leasing company located in Russia.
21. **LLC Baikal Center** is a construction company located in Russia.
22. **LLC Progorod** is an infrastructure company located in Russia.
23. **LLC VEB.RF Asset Management** is a financial company located in Russia.
24. **Eximbank of Russia JSC** is an export support institution located in Russia as well as a commercial bank regulated by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation.
25. **Russian Agency for Export Credit and Investment Insurance OJSC** is an insurance agency located in Russia.

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY**Office of Foreign Assets Control****Notice of OFAC Sanctions Actions**

AGENCY: Office of Foreign Assets Control, Treasury.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: The U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is publishing the names of one or more persons or property that have been placed on one or more of OFAC's sanctions lists based on OFAC's determination that one or more applicable legal criteria were satisfied.

DATES: See **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** section for effective date(s).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

OFAC: Andrea Gacki, Director, tel.: 202-622-2490; Associate Director for Global Targeting, tel.: 202-622-2420; Assistant Director for Licensing, tel.: 202-622-2480; Assistant Director for Regulatory Affairs, tel.: 202-622-4855; or the Assistant Director for Sanctions Compliance & Evaluation, tel.: 202-622-2490.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**Electronic Availability**

The Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List and additional information concerning OFAC sanctions

programs are available on OFAC's website (<https://www.treasury.gov/ofac>).

Notice of OFAC Actions*A. Blocking of Property and Interests in Property Pursuant to E.O. 14024*

On February 22, 2022, OFAC determined that the property and interests in property subject to U.S. jurisdiction of the following persons are blocked under the relevant sanctions authority listed below. U.S. persons are generally prohibited from engaging in transactions with them. These names have been placed on OFAC's List of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons.

BILLING CODE 4810-AL-P

Individuals

1. BORTNIKOV, Alexander Vasilievich (Cyrillic: БОРТНИКОВ, Александр Васильевич) (a.k.a. BORTNIKOV, Alexander), Moscow, Russia; DOB 15 Nov 1951; POB Perm, Russia; nationality Russia; Gender Male (individual) [NPWMD] [UKRAINE-EO13661] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: FEDERAL SECURITY SERVICE).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(iii) of Executive Order 14024 of April 15, 2021, "Blocking Property With Respect To Specified Harmful Foreign Activities of the Government of the Russian Federation," (E.O. 14024) for being or having been a leader, official, senior executive officer, or member of the board of directors of the Government of the Russian Federation.

2. KIRIYENKO, Sergei Vladilenovich (Cyrillic: КИРИЕНКО, Сергей Владиленович) (a.k.a. KIRIYENKO, Sergei), Moscow, Russia; DOB 26 Jul 1962; POB Sukhumi, Georgia; nationality Russia; Gender Male (individual) [UKRAINE-EO13661] [RUSSIA-EO14024].

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(iii) of E.O. 14024 for being or having been a leader, official, senior executive officer, or member of the board of directors of the Government of the Russian Federation.

3. FRADKOV, Petr Mikhailovich (Cyrillic: ФРАДКОВ, Пётр Михайлович) (a.k.a. FRADKOV, Petr; a.k.a. FRADKOV, Petr Mihaylovich; a.k.a. FRADKOV, Pyotr Mikhailovich; a.k.a. FRADKOV, Pyotr Mikhaylovich; a.k.a. FRAKOV, Pyetr Mikhaylovich), 33-1 Prospekt Mira, Apt. 34, Moscow, Russia; DOB 07 Feb 1978; POB Moscow, Russia; nationality Russia; Gender Male; Passport 530285387 (Russia) issued 31 Oct 2012 expires 12 Jul 2022; National ID No. 45033399117 (Russia) (individual) [RUSSIA-EO14024].

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(i) of E.O. 14024 for operating or having operated in the defense and related materiel sector and the financial services sector of the Russian Federation economy.

4. BORTNIKOV, Denis Aleksandrovich (Cyrillic: БОРТНИКОВ, Денис Александрович), Moscow, Russia; DOB 19 Nov 1974; POB Leningrad region, Russia; nationality Russia; Gender Male (individual) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: BORTNIKOV, Alexander Vasilievich).

Designated pursuant to sections 1(a)(iii) and 1(a)(v) of E.O. 14024 for being or having been a leader, official, senior executive officer, or member of the board of directors of the Government of the Russian Federation and for being the spouse or adult child of Alexander Vasilievich Bortnikov, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to section 1(a)(ii) or (iii) of E.O. 14024.

5. KIRIYENKO, Vladimir Sergeevich (Cyrillic: КИРИЕНКО, Владимир Сергеевич) (a.k.a. KIRIYENKO, Vladimir), Nesivizhsky Pereulok 12 Bld 1 Flat 16, Moscow 119021, Russia; DOB 27 May 1983; POB Nizhny Novgorod, Russia; nationality Russia; Gender Male; Passport 731167796 (Russia) issued 06 Sep 2013 expires 17 Feb 2022 (individual) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: KIRIYENKO, Sergei Vladilenovich).

Designated pursuant to sections 1(a)(iii) and 1(a)(v) of E.O. 14024 for being or having been a leader, official, senior executive officer, or member of the board of directors of the Government of the Russian Federation and for being the spouse or adult child of Sergei Vladilenovich Kiriyeenko, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to section 1(a)(ii) or (iii) of E.O. 14024.

Entities

1. ALKES TREID OOO (Cyrillic: ООО АЛКЕС ТРЕЙД) (a.k.a. ALKES TREID LLC), Ul. Smirnovskaya d. 10, Str. 3. Pom VIII, Moscow, 109052, Russia (Cyrillic: Улица Смирновская, Дом 10, Строение 3, Помещение VIII, Москва 109052, Russia); Organization Established Date 08 Feb 2018; Tax ID No. 7722437025 (Russia); Registration Number 1187746135862 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

2. ANTARES OOO (Cyrillic: ООО АНТАРЕС) (a.k.a. ANTARES LLC; a.k.a. LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY ANTARES (Cyrillic: ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ АНТАРЕС)), Ul. Smirnovskaya d. 10, Str. 8. kabinet 10, Moscow 109052, Russia (Cyrillic: Ул. Смирновская, д. 10, стр. 8, каб. 10, Москва 109052, Russia); Organization Established Date 02 Jun 2017; Tax ID No. 7722399997 (Russia); Registration Number 7722399997 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

3. ELITNYE DOMA OOO (Cyrillic: ООО ЭЛИТНЫЕ ДОМА) (f.k.a. ELITNYE DOMA AO; a.k.a. ELITNYE DOMA LLC; a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU ELITNYE DOMA), Ul.

Smirnovskaya d. 10, Str. 8, Kabinet 8, Moscow 109052, Russia (Cyrillic: Ул. Смирновская, д. 10, Стр. 8, Каб. 8, Москва 109052, Russia); Organization Established Date 26 Feb 2004; Tax ID No. 7706415641 (Russia); Registration Number 1147748157061 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

4. ERA FUND LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY (a.k.a. ERA FUND LLC (Cyrillic: ООО ФОНД ЭРА); a.k.a. ООО PSB-FINTEKH (Cyrillic: ООО ПСБ-ФИНТЕХ)), Ul. Novo-Sadovaya D. 3 Komnata 163 Floor 3, Samara 443100, Russia (Cyrillic: Улица Ново-садовая, дом 3, комната 163 этаж 3, Самара 443100, Russia); Organization Established Date 04 Sep 2017; Tax ID No. 6316237712 (Russia); Registration Number 1176313076433 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

5. KHOLTSVUD ООО (Cyrillic: ООО ХОЛЬЦВУД) (a.k.a. HOLZVUD; a.k.a. KHOLTSVUD LLC; a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU KHOLTSVUD (Cyrillic: ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ ХОЛЬЦВУД)), Ul. Smirnovskaya D. 10, Str. 8, Kabinet 8, Moscow 109052, Russia (Cyrillic: Ул. Смирновская, Д. 10, Стр. 8, Каб. 8, Москва 109052, Russia); Organization Established Date 08 Sep 2014; Registration ID 5147746070368 (Russia); Tax ID No. 7722854607 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

6. KOURF ООО (Cyrillic: ООО КОУРФ) (a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU KOURF (Cyrillic: ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ КОУРФ)), Pr-Kt Oktyabrskii D. 111/119, Pom. 1, Komnata 6, Floor 2, Lyubertsy 140002, Russia (Cyrillic: Проспект Октябрьский, Дом 111/119, Помещение 1, Комната 6, Этаж 2, Люберцы 140002, Russia); Organization Established Date 05 Apr 2010; Tax ID No. 5027160402 (Russia); Registration Number 1105027004213 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

7. MANAGEMENT COMPANY PROMSVYAZ LLC (Cyrillic: УПРАВЛЯЮЩАЯ КОМПАНИЯ ПРОМСВЯЗЬ) (a.k.a. UK PROMSVYAZ OOO), d.13 str. 1 etazh 5 kom. 1-31, ul. Nikoloyamskaya, Moscow 109240, Russia; Organization Established Date 10 Jul 2002; Tax ID No. 7718218817 (Russia); Registration Number 1027718000067 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

8. PASKAL OOO (Cyrillic: ООО ПАСКАЛЬ) (a.k.a. PASKAL LLC), Ul. Smirnovskaya D. 10, Str. 8 Kabinet 12, Moscow 109052, Russia (Cyrillic: Ул. Смирновская д. 10, стр. 8 каб. 12, Москва 109052, Russia); Organization Established Date 09 Apr 2015; Tax ID No. 7725269347 (Russia); Registration Number 1157746322370 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

9. PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY (Cyrillic: ПУБЛИЧНОЕ АКЦИОНЕРНОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО ПРОМСВЯЗЬБАНК) (f.k.a. OJSC PROMSVYAZBANK; a.k.a. PROMSVYAZBANK PAO (Cyrillic: ПАО ПРОМСВЯЗЬБАНК); a.k.a. PROMSVYAZBANK PJSC; a.k.a. PUBLICHNOE AKTSIONERNOE OBSHCHESTVO PROMSVYAZBANK), Smirnovskaya Street 10/22, Moscow 109052, Russia; SWIFT/BIC PRMSRUMM; Website www.psbank.ru; BIK (RU) 044525555; Organization Established Date 2001; Target Type Financial Institution; Tax ID No. 7744000912 (Russia); Government Gazette Number 40148343 (Russia); Registration Number 1027739019142 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024].

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(i) of E.O. 14024 for operating or having operated in the defense and related materiel sector and the financial services sector of the Russian Federation economy.

10. PSB AVIALIZING OOO (a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU PSB AVIALIZING), d. 65A etazh 2, pom. 17-30, bulvar Gagarina Perm, Permski Kr. 614077, Russia; Organization Established Date 20 Jul 2020; Tax ID No. 5906167110 (Russia); Government Gazette Number 44885614 (Russia); Registration Number 1205900018532 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

11. PSB BIZNES OOO (Cyrillic: ООО ПСБ БИЗНЕС) (a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU PSB BIZNES; a.k.a. OOO PSB BIZNES; a.k.a. OOO VENTURE FUND SME; a.k.a. SME VENTURE LLC; a.k.a. VENCHURNY FOND MSB OOO), d. 23 Str. 3 pom. II kom. 1K, 1L, 1M, 1N, 1O, 1P, ul. Lva Tolstogo, Moscow 119021, Russia; Organization Established Date 23 Sep 2013; Tax ID No. 5042129460 (Russia); Government Gazette Number 18098784 (Russia); Registration Number 1135042007539 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

12. PSB INNOVATIONS AND INVESTMENTS LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY (a.k.a. "ITSBT LLC"; a.k.a. "ITSBT OOO"; a.k.a. "PSB I AND I LLC"; a.k.a. "PSB I&I LLC"; a.k.a. "PSB II OOO" (Cyrillic: "ООО ПСБ ИИ")), vn.ter.g. munitsipalny okrug Sokolniki, ul Strommnyka d. 18 str. 27, kom., Moscow 107076, Russia; Organization Established Date 19 Aug 2015; Tax ID No. 7731290146 (Russia); Registration Number 115774762381 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

13. PSB-FOREKS OOO (a.k.a. FUND FOR NON-BANKING TECHNOLOGIES LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY; a.k.a. LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY PSB-FOREKS (Cyrillic: ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ ПСБ-ФОРЕКС); a.k.a. PSB-FOREKS LLC; a.k.a. "FNBT LLC" (Cyrillic: "ООО ФНБТ")), D. 7, Str. 8, Pom. III Kom. N1 Etazh 2, Naberezhnaya Derbenevskaya, Moscow 115114, Russia; Organization Established Date 11 Jul 2016; Tax ID No. 7725323192 (Russia); Registration Number 1167746652193 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

14. SAINT-PETERSBURG INTERNATIONAL BANKING CONFERENCE LLC (a.k.a. LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY SAINT-PETERSBURG INTERNATIONAL BANKING CONFERENCE (Cyrillic: ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГСКАЯ МЕЖДУНАРОДНАЯ БАНКОВСКАЯ КОНФЕРЕНЦИЯ); a.k.a. PSB AVTOFACTORING), Ul. Smirnovskaya D. 10, Str. 8, Komnata 7, Moscow 109052, Russia; d. 42, Moskovskoe Shosse, Sergiev Posad, Moscow Oblast 141300, Russia (Cyrillic: д. 42, Московское Шоссе, Сергиев Посад, Московская Область 141300, Russia); Organization Established Date 30 Dec 2010; Tax ID No. 5042116461 (Russia); Registration Number 1105042007806 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

15. SERGIEVO-POSAD LEND OOO (Cyrillic: ООО СЕРГИЕВО-ПОСАД ЛЭНД) (a.k.a. SERGIEVO-POSAD LAND; a.k.a. SERGIEVO-POSAD LEND; a.k.a. SERGIEVO-POSAD LEND LLC), Ul. Tsentralnaya D. 36, Shemetovo, Sergiev Posad 141335, Russia (Cyrillic: Ул. Центральная д. 36, Шеметово, Сергиев Посад 141335, Russia); Organization Established Date 19 Apr 2011; Tax ID No. 5042118606 (Russia); Registration Number 115042002371 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

16. TEKHNOSOFT OOO (Cyrillic: ООО ТЕХНОСОФТ) (a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU TEKHNOSOFT (Cyrillic: ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ ТЕХНОСОФТ)), Ul. Nobelya D. 5, ET 2 POM.29 Ter. Skolkovo Innovatsionnogo Tsentra, 121205, Russia; Organization Established Date 11 Jul 2014; Tax ID No. 7703813813 (Russia); Registration Number 1147746784866 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

17. TRINITEX OOO (Cyrillic: ООО ТРИНИТЕКС) (a.k.a. TRINITEX LLC), d. 10 Str. 8 kom. 8, ul. Smirnovskaya, Moscow 109052, Russia; Organization Established Date 19 Apr 2018; Tax ID No. 7751142717 (Russia); Government Gazette Number 28329368 (Russia); Registration Number 1187746421576

(Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

18. PSB LIZING OOO (Cyrillic: ПСБ ЛИЗИНГ ООО) (a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU PSB LIZING (Cyrillic: ОБЩЕСТВО С ОГРАНИЧЕННОЙ ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬЮ ПСБ ЛИЗИНГ); a.k.a. PSB LEASING LLC), Room 8, Building 22, ul Smirnovkaya 10, Moscow 109052, Russia (Cyrillic: Улица Смирновская, Дом 10, Комната 8, Строение 22, Город Москва 109052, Russia); Organization Established Date 05 Jul 2006; Tax ID No. 7722581759 (Russia); Government Gazette Number 96441526 (Russia); Registration Number 1067746771784 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PROMSVYAZBANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, Promsvyazbank Public Joint Stock Company, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

19. STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK (f.k.a. BANK FOR FOREIGN TRADE OF THE U.S.S.R.; a.k.a. GK VEB.RF; a.k.a. GOSUDARSTVENNAYA KORPORATSIYA RAZVITIYA VEB.RF; a.k.a. STATE DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION VEB.RF (Cyrillic: ГОСУДАРСТВЕННАЯ КОРПОРАЦИЯ РАЗВИТИЯ ВЭБ.РФ); a.k.a. VEB.RF (Cyrillic: ВЭБ.РФ); f.k.a. VNESHECONOMBANK; f.k.a. VNESHEKONOMBANK GK; f.k.a. VNESHEKONOMBANK SSSR; a.k.a. "BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT"; a.k.a. "VEB"), Akademik Sakharov Ave 9, Moscow 107996, Russia; Pr-kt, Akademika Sakharova, D. 9, Moscow 107078, Russia (Cyrillic: Пр-Кт Академика Сахарова, Д. 9, Город Москва 107078, Russia); SWIFT/BIC BFEARUMM; Website www.veb.ru; BIK (RU) 044525060; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 18 Aug 1922; Target Type State-Owned Enterprise; alt. Target Type Financial Institution; Tax ID No. 7750004150 (Russia); Government Gazette Number 00005061 (Russia); Registration Number 1077711000102 (Russia); For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024].

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(i) and 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for operating or having operated in the financial services sector of the Russian Federation economy and for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, the Government of the Russian Federation.

20. EXIMBANK OF RUSSIA JSC (a.k.a. AO ROSEKSIMBANK (Cyrillic: АО РОСЭКСИМБАНК); a.k.a. EXIMBANK OF RUSSIA; a.k.a. EXIMBANK OF

RUSSIA ZAO; a.k.a. GOSUDARSTVENNY SPETSIALIZIROVANNY ROSSISKI EKSPORTNO-IMPORTNY BANK (ZAKRYTOE AKTSIONERNOE OBSHCHESTVO); a.k.a. ROSEKSIMBANK, ZAO; a.k.a. RUSSIAN EXPORT-IMPORT BANK; a.k.a. STATE SPECIALIZED RUSSIAN EXPORT-IMPORT BANK JOINT-STOCK COMPANY (Cyrillic: ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ СПЕЦИАЛИЗИРОВАННЫЙ РОССИЙСКИЙ ЭКСПОРТНО-ИМПОРТНЫЙ БАНК АКЦИОНЕРНОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО)), 12 Krasnopresnenskaya Embankments, Moscow 123610, Russia; SWIFT/BIC EXIRRUMM; Website eximbank.ru; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 24 May 1994; Target Type Financial Institution; Tax ID No. 7704001959 (Russia); Legal Entity Number 253400HA6URWT39X2982; Registration Number 1027739109133 (Russia); All offices worldwide; for more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

21. RUSSIAN AGENCY FOR EXPORT CREDIT AND INVESTMENT INSURANCE OJSC (a.k.a. EKSAR OAO; a.k.a. EXIAR; a.k.a. EXIAR JSC; a.k.a. EXIAR OJSC; a.k.a. ROSSISKOE AGENTSTVO PO STRAKHOVANIYU EKSPORTNYKH KREDITOV I INVESTITSI OTKRYTOE AKTSIONERNOE OBSHCHESTVO; a.k.a. RUSSIAN AGENCY FOR EXPORT CREDIT AND INVESTMENT INSURANCE JSC), nab. Krasnopresnenskaya d. 12, Moscow 123610, Russia; Website exiar.ru; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 13 Oct 2011; Target Type Government Entity; Tax ID No. 7704792651 (Russia); Registration Number 1117746811566 (Russia); For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

22. JSC SLAVA (a.k.a. AO SLAVA; a.k.a. MOSCOW JOINT STOCK COMPANY SLAVA SECOND WATCH FACTORY), Ul. Verkhnyaya d. 34, Str. 1, 2 Et, Pom. 8, Komn. 50, Moscow 125040, Russia; Website www.slava-watch.com; Tax ID

No. 7714046028 (Russia); Registration Number 1027700324530 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

23. LLC VEB.RF ASSET MANAGEMENT (a.k.a. VEB.RF UPRAVLENIE AKTIVAMI), B-R 31 Novinskii D., Floor 7, Pomeshch. I. Kom 16, Moscow 123242, Russia; Tax ID No. 9704032929 (Russia); Registration Number 1207700367930 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

24. LLC TORGOVY KVARTAL-NOVOSIBIRSK, Ul. Frunze d. 238, Novosibirsk 630112, Russia; Website www.sibmoll.ru; Tax ID No. 5405230467 (Russia); Registration Number 1025401906639 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

25. JSC INFRAVEB (a.k.a. AKTSIONERNOE OBSHCHESTVO VEB INFRASTRUKTURA; a.k.a. AO INFRAVEB), ul. Mashl Poryvaevoi D. 7 str. V, Moscow 107078, Russia; ul. Vozdvizhenka D. 7/6, str. 1, et/pom/kom 3/II/7, Moscow 119019, Russia; Website vebinfra.ru; Tax ID No. 7704133578 (Russia); Registration Number 1027739088410 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

26. LLC RESORT ZOLOTUE KOLTZO (a.k.a. KURORT ZOLOTUE KOLTZO (Cyrillic: КУРОРТ ЗОЛОТУЕ КОЛЪЦО); a.k.a. LLC KURORT ZOLOTUE KOLTZO), ul. Svobody D. 8, office 6, g. Pereslavl-Zalesskii, 152020, Russia; Shosse Varshavskoe D 47, korp 4, Moscow 114230, Russia; Tax ID No. 7724331673 (Russia); Registration Number 1157746795733 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

27. JSC RUSSIAN EXPORT CENTER (a.k.a. AKTSIONERNOE OBSHCHESTVO ROSSIISKII EKSPORTNYI TSENTR; f.k.a. AO NATSIONALNY EKSPORTNY TSENTR; a.k.a. AO ROSSIISKII EKSPORTNYI TSENTR; a.k.a. AO ROSSISKI EKSPORTNY TSENTR), D. 12 etazh 13 pom. 1301, naberezhnaya Krasnopresnenskaya, Moscow 123610, Russia; Website exportcenter.ru; Tax ID No. 7703376553 (Russia); Registration Number 1157746363994 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

28. LLC VEB VENTURES (a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU VEB VENCHURS; f.k.a. OOO VEB INNOVATSIYA; a.k.a. OOO VEB VENCHURS; f.k.a. VEB INNOVATIONS; a.k.a. VEB VENCHURS), D. 2 etazh 7, Ul. Bleza Paskalya Ter. Skolkovo Innovatsionnogo, Moscow 121205, Russia; Website vebinnovations.ru; Tax ID No. 7731373995 (Russia); Registration Number 1177746639036 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

29. LLC VEB SERVICE (a.k.a. VEB SERVICE; a.k.a. VEB SERVIS), PR-KT Akademika Sakharova D. 9, Komnata 205 K, Moscow 107078, Russia; Tax ID No. 7708325680 (Russia); Registration Number 1177746934023 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR

DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS
VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

30. LLC SPECIAL ORGANIZATION FOR PROJECT FINANCE FACTORY OF PROJECT FINANCE (a.k.a. SPETSIALIZIROVANNOE OBSHCHESTVO PROEKTNOGO FINANSIROVANIYA FABRIKA PROEKTNOGO FINANSIROVANIYA; a.k.a. "PROJECT FINANCE FACTORY"), pr-kt Akademika Sakharova d. 9, komnata 220, Moscow 107078, Russia; Tax ID No. 7708330489 (Russia); Registration Number 1187746103885 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

31. LLC SIBUGLEMET GROUP (a.k.a. GRUPPA SIBUGLEMET), ul. Mash Poryvaevoi d. 34, kom. 3, Moscow 107078, Russia; Tax ID No. 7708320240 (Russia); Registration Number 1177746596268 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

32. JSC ANGSTREM-T (a.k.a. AKTSIONERNOE OBSHCHESTVO ANGSTREM-T), pr-kt Georgievskii d. 7, Zelenograd 124498, Russia; Registration ID 1057735022377 (Russia); Tax ID No. 7735128151 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

33. LLC NM-TEKH (a.k.a. NM-TEKH), pr-kt Georgievskii d. 7, Zelenograd 124498, Russia; al. Solnechnaya d. 6, floor 1 pom. xii office 4, 4a, Zelenograd 124527, Russia; Tax ID No. 7735183410 (Russia); Registration Number 1197746306790

(Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

34. JSC PFC CSKA (a.k.a. AO PFK TSSKA; a.k.a. JOINT STOCK COMPANY PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL CLUB CSKA), Ul. 3-ya Peschanaya, d. 2a, severo-zapadnoe administrativnoe zdanie, 10-I et, Moscow 125252, Russia; Website www.pfc-cska.com; Tax ID No. 7734046851 (Russia); Registration Number 1027739880893 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

35. LLC BAIKAL CENTER (a.k.a. BAIKAL.TSENTR; a.k.a. TSENTR RAZVITIYA BAIKALSKOGO REGIONA), Vozdvizhenka d. 7/6, str. 1, pomeshch. 10, Moscow 119019, Russia; Tax ID No. 7704732846 (Russia); Registration Number 1097746515240 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

36. LLC PROGOROD (a.k.a. NOVYE GORODSKIE PROEKTY; a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU NOVYE GORODSKIE PROEKTY; a.k.a. OOO PROGOROD), d. 10 etazh 7 pom. XIII kom. 2, ul. Vozdvizhenka, Moscow 125009, Russia; Tax ID No. 9704013161 (Russia); Registration Number 1207700089101 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

37. BANK BELVEB OJSC (a.k.a. BANK BELVEB OPEN JOINT STOCK COMPANY; a.k.a. BELVESHECONOMBANK OAO; a.k.a. BELVNESHECONOMBANK OPEN JOINT STOCK COMPANY), 29 Pobeditelei ave., Minsk 220004, Belarus; Myasnikova, 32, Minsk 220050, Belarus; SWIFT/BIC BELBBY2X; Website bveb.by; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 23 Dec 1991; Target Type Financial Institution; Tax ID No. 7750004150 (Russia); Legal Entity Number 25340038P8SYW80B9W34 (Russia); All offices worldwide; for more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

38. VEB LEASING OJSC (a.k.a. OAO VEB LIZING; a.k.a. OJSC VEB LEASING; a.k.a. OPEN JOINT STOCK COMPANY VEB LEASING; a.k.a. OTKRYTOE AKTSIONERNOE OBSHCHESTVO VEB LIZING), d. 10 ul. Vozdvizhenka, Moscow 125009, Russia; Str. Dolgorukovskaya, 7, Novoslobodskaya, Moscow 127006, Russia; Website veb-leasing.ru; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 2003; Tax ID No. 7709413138 (Russia); Registration Number 1037709024781 (Russia); For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

39. PROMINVESTBANK (a.k.a. COMMERCIAL INDUSTRIAL AND INVESTMENT BANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY; a.k.a. JOINT STOCK COMMERCIAL INDUSTRIAL AND INVESTMENT BANK PUBLIC JOINT STOCK COMPANY; a.k.a. PSC PROMINVESTBANK; a.k.a. PUBLIC STOCK COMPANY JOINT STOCK COMMERCIAL INDUSTRIAL AND INVESTMENT BANK), 12, Shevchenko lane, Kyiv 01001, Ukraine; SWIFT/BIC UPIBUAUX; Website pib.ua; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 26 Aug 1992; Target Type Financial Institution; Registration Number 00039002 (Ukraine); All offices worldwide; for more information on directives, please visit

the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

40. VEB CAPITAL (a.k.a. LLC VEB CAPITAL; a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU INVESTITSIONNA YA KOMPANIYA VNESHEKONOMBANKA; a.k.a. OOO VEB KAPITAL), d. 7 str. A ul. Mashi Poryvaevoi, Moscow 107078, Russia; Website vebcapital.ru; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 24 Dec 2009; Tax ID No. 7708710924 (Russia); Registration Number 1097746831709 (Russia); For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

41. VEB ENGINEERING LLC (a.k.a. OBSHCHESTVO S OGRANICHENNOI OTVETSTVENNOSTYU VEB INZHINIRING; a.k.a. OOO VEB ENGINEERING; a.k.a. OOO VEB INZHINIRING; a.k.a. VEB ENGINEERING LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANY), d. 9 prospekt Akademika Sakharova, Moscow 107996, Russia; Per. Lyalin D. 19, Korpus 1, Pom. XXIV, Kom 11, Moscow 101000, Russia; Website vebeng.ru; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 11 Mar 2010; Tax ID No. 7708715560 (Russia); Registration Number 1107746181674 (Russia); For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

42. JSC VEB.DV (a.k.a. AO VEB.DV; f.k.a. FAR EAST AND BAIKAL REGION DEVELOPMENT FUND OJSC; f.k.a. JSC FAR EAST AND ARCTIC REGION DEVELOPMENT FUND; f.k.a. OJSC THE FAR EAST AND BAIKAL REGION DEVELOPMENT FUND), Nab. Presnenskaya D. 10, pom II komn 8-59, Moscow 123112, Russia; Website fondvostok.ru; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Tax ID No. 2721188289 (Russia); Registration Number 1112721010995 (Russia); For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

43. VEB ASIA LIMITED, Suite 5808, 58/F, Two International Finance Center, 8 Finance Street Central, Hong Kong, China; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Organization Established Date 08 Apr 2013; Registration Number 1886537 (Hong Kong); For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

44. LLC INFRASTRUCTURE MOLZHANINOVO (Cyrillic: ООО ИНФРАСТРУКТУРА МОЛЖАНИНОВО) (a.k.a. INFRASTRUKTURA MOLZHANINOVO; f.k.a. LLC RESAD (Cyrillic: ООО РЕСАД); f.k.a. RESAD LLC), ul. Bryanskaya D. 5, et 4 pom. 1 kom 25, Moscow 121059, Russia; Executive Order 13662 Directive Determination - Subject to Directive 1; Tax ID No. 7733109347 (Russia); Registration Number 1027739071337 (Russia); For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/ukraine.aspx#directives>. [UKRAINE-EO13662] [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: STATE CORPORATION BANK FOR DEVELOPMENT AND FOREIGN ECONOMIC AFFAIRS VNESHECONOMBANK).

Designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) of E.O. 14024 for being owned or controlled by, or for having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly

or indirectly, State Corporation Bank for Development and Foreign Economic Affairs Vnesheconombank, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024.

Vessels

1. BALTIC LEADER (Cyrillic: БАЛТИК ЛИДЕР) Roll-on Roll-off 8,831 GRT Russia flag; Vessel Registration Identification IMO 9220639 (vessel) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PSB LIZING OOO).

Identified as property in which PSB Lizing OOO, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024, has an interest.

2. FESCO MAGADAN (Cyrillic: ФЕКО МАГАДАН) Container Ship 7,519 GRT Russia flag; Vessel Registration Identification IMO 9287699 (vessel) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PSB LIZING OOO).

Identified as property in which PSB Lizing OOO, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024, has an interest.

3. FESCO MONERON (Cyrillic: ФЕКО МОНЕРОН) Container Ship 7,519 GRT Russia flag; Vessel Registration Identification IMO 9277412 (vessel) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PSB LIZING OOO).

Identified as property in which PSB Lizing OOO, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024, has an interest.

4. LINDA (Cyrillic: ЛИНДА) (f.k.a. "LADY D" (Cyrillic: "ЛЕДИ Д")) Crude Oil Tanker 61,991 GRT Russia flag; Vessel Registration Identification IMO 9256858 (vessel) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PSB LIZING OOO).

Identified as property in which PSB Lizing OOO, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024, has an interest.

5. PEGAS (Cyrillic: ПЕГАС) (f.k.a. "PERUN" (Cyrillic: "ПЕРУН")) Crude Oil Tanker 61,991 GRT Russia flag; Vessel Registration Identification IMO 9256860 (Russia) (vessel) [RUSSIA-EO14024] (Linked To: PSB LIZING OOO).

Identified as property in which PSB Lizing OOO, a person whose property and interests in property are blocked pursuant to E.O. 14024, has an interest.

<i>B. Persons Determined To Be Subject to Directive 1A Under E.O. 14024</i>	or instrumentalities of the Government of the Russian Federation; and (b) shall be subject to the prohibitions of Directive 1A under E.O. 14024, “Prohibitions Related to Certain Sovereign Debt of the Russian	Federation,” which replaces and supersedes Directive 1 of April 15, 2021 under E.O. 14024. These names have been placed on OFAC’s Non-SDN Menu-Based Sanctions List.
On February 22, 2022, OFAC determined that the following entities (a) are political subdivisions, agencies,		

1. MINISTRY OF FINANCE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION (Cyrillic: МИНИСТЕРСТВО ФИНАНСОВ РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ), 9 Ilyinka Street, Moscow 109097, Russia (Cyrillic: ул. Ильинка, 9, Москва 109097, Russia); Target Type Government Entity; Executive Order 14024 Directive Information - For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/russian-harmful-foreign-activities-sanctions#directives>; Executive Order 14024 Directive Information Subject to Directive 1a - As of the effective date, participation in the secondary market for ruble or non-ruble denominated bonds issued on or after the effective date by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the National Wealth Fund of the Russian Federation, or the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation is prohibited.; Listing Date (EO 14024 Directive 1a): 22 Feb 2022; Effective Date (EO 14024 Directive 1a): 01 Mar 2022 [RUSSIA-EO14024].
2. NATIONAL WEALTH FUND OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION (Cyrillic: ФОНД НАЦИОНАЛЬНОГО БЛАГОСОСТОЯНИЯ), 9 Ilyinka Street, Moscow 109097, Russia (Cyrillic: ул. Ильинка, 9, Москва 109097, Russia); Target Type Government Entity; Executive Order 14024 Directive Information - For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/russian-harmful-foreign-activities-sanctions#directives>; Executive Order 14024 Directive Information Subject to Directive 1a - As of the effective date, participation in the secondary market for ruble or non-ruble denominated bonds issued on or after the effective date by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the National Wealth Fund of the Russian Federation, or the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation is prohibited.; Listing Date (EO 14024 Directive 1a): 22 Feb 2022; Effective Date (EO 14024 Directive 1a): 01 Mar 2022 [RUSSIA-EO14024].
3. CENTRAL BANK OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION (Cyrillic: ЦЕНТРАЛЬНЫЙ БАНК РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ) (a.k.a. BANK OF RUSSIA; a.k.a. BANK OF RUSSIA, CENTRAL BANK; a.k.a. BANK ROSSI, FEDERAL STATE BUDGETARY INSTITUTION; a.k.a. CENTRAL BANK OF RUSSIA; a.k.a. TSENTRALNY BANK ROSSISKOI FEDERATSII), Neglinnaya St 12, Moscow 107016, Russia; Moscow, Russia; SWIFT/BIC CBRFRUMM; Website www.cbr.ru; Organization Established Date 13 Jul 1990; Organization Type: Central banking; Target Type Government Entity; Executive Order 14024 Directive Information - For more information on directives, please visit the following link: <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/russian-harmful-foreign-activities-sanctions#directives>; Executive Order 14024 Directive Information Subject to Directive 1a - As of the effective date, participation in the secondary market for ruble or non-ruble denominated bonds issued on or after the effective date by the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the National Wealth Fund of the Russian Federation, or the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation is prohibited.; Listing Date (EO 14024 Directive 1a): 22 Feb 2022; Effective Date

(EO 14024 Directive 1a): 01 Mar 2022; Tax ID No. 7702235133 (Russia); Government Gazette Number 00032253 (Russia); Registration Number 1037700013020 (Russia) [RUSSIA-EO14024].

Dated: February 22, 2022.

Andrea M. Gacki,

*Director, Office of Foreign Assets Control,
U.S. Department of the Treasury.*

[FR Doc. 2022-04092 Filed 2-25-22; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4810-AL-C

UNIFIED CARRIER REGISTRATION PLAN

Sunshine Act; Meeting

TIME AND DATE: March 3, 2022, from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., Eastern time.

PLACE: This meeting will be accessible via conference call and screensharing. Any interested person may call 877-853-5247 (US toll free), 888-788-0099 (US toll free), +1 929-205-6099 (US toll), or +1 669-900-6833 (US toll), Conference ID 920 2493 9329, to participate in the meeting. The website to participate via Zoom meeting and screenshare is <https://kellen.zoom.us/j/92024939329>.
GN1UxVfSCrLBaqt3I-sDBwzt.

STATUS: This meeting will be open to the public.

MATTERS TO BE CONSIDERED: The Unified Carrier Registration Plan Board of Directors (the “Board”) will continue its work in developing and implementing the Unified Carrier Registration Plan and Agreement. The subject matter of the meeting will include:

Agenda

I. Welcome and Call to Order—UCR Board Chair

The UCR Board Chair will welcome attendees, call the meeting to order, call roll for the Board, confirm the presence of a quorum, and facilitate self-introductions.

II. Verification of Publication of Meeting Notice—UCR Executive Director

The UCR Executive Director will verify publication of the meeting notice on the UCR website and distribution to the UCR contact list via email followed by subsequent publication of the notice in the **Federal Register**.

III. Review and Approval of Board Agenda—UCR Board Chair

For Discussion and Possible Action

The proposed Agenda will be reviewed, and the Board will consider adoption.

Ground Rules

➤ Board actions taken only in designated areas on agenda.

IV. Approval of Board Minutes of the January 27, 2022 UCR Board Meeting—UCR Board Chair

For Discussion and Possible Action

Draft Minutes from the January 27, 2022 UCR Board meeting will be reviewed. The Board will consider action to approve.

V. Report of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA)—FMCSA Representative

The FMCSA will provide a report on any relevant activity.

VI. Chief Legal Officer Report—UCR Chief Legal Officer

The UCR Chief Legal Officer will report on matters of interest to the UCR Plan.

VII. Engagement Letter Between the UCR Plan and the Bradley Law Firm—UCR Executive Director and UCR Board Chair

For Discussion and Possible Board Action

A general engagement letter between the UCR Plan and the Bradley Law Firm, covering the broad scope of legal issues directed to Alex Leath by the UCR Plan in calendar year 2022, will be presented to the UCR Board for its consideration and approval.

VIII. Subcommittee Reports

Audit Subcommittee—UCR Audit Subcommittee Chair

A. UCR Compliance Snapshot—UCR Audit Subcommittee Chair

The UCR Audit Subcommittee Chair will review audit compliance rates for the states for registration years 2020, 2021, and 2022 and will include compliance percentages for Focused Anomaly Reviews (FARs), retreat audits, and registration compliance percentages as mandated by the UCR Board. A new element has been added that focuses on the states’ enforcement and citations actually issued versus the “Should Have Been” (“SHB”) road-stops that were not cited. The new feature ranks the states based on citation percentages.

B. Discuss the New IRP and IFTA Reports Available on the NRS—UCR Audit Subcommittee Chair and DSL Transportation Services, Inc. (DSL)

The UCR Audit Subcommittee Chair and DSL will discuss the value of following up on the Title 49 CFR 392.2 violations. The discussion will highlight the financial value to the states by vetting these companies for UCR compliance, commercial registration, IFTA, intrastate, interstate operating authority and safety compliance. Title 49 CFR 392.2 requires commercial motor vehicles to operate in accordance with the laws, ordinances, and regulations of the jurisdiction in which they are operating within.

C. Review 2022 Kansas SHB Report—Audit Subcommittee Chair, Verna Jackson, and DSL

The UCR Audit Subcommittee Chair, supported by Verna Jackson and DSL, will explain the Kansas review process. The discussion will focus on the value of following up on 49 CFR 392.2 violators to ensure both UCR and safety compliance, and the correlation between various NRS tools available to the states.

Finance Subcommittee—UCR Finance Subcommittee Chair

A. Redemption of Certificates of Deposit (CDs)—UCR Finance Subcommittee Chair and UCR Depository Manager

For Discussion and Possible Board Action

The UCR Finance Subcommittee Chair and UCR Depository Manager will discuss the opportunity to redeem up to two separate CDs prior to maturity and use the proceeds to purchase U.S. Treasury Bills which have higher income earning potential than CDs do. The Board may take action to redeem the CDs and use the proceeds to purchase U.S. Treasury Bills.

B. Fee Recommendation for 2023 Registration Year—UCR Comment—UCR Finance Subcommittee Chair and UCR Depository Manager

The UCR Finance Subcommittee Chair and the UCR Depository Manager will provide an update on the issuance of a comment to the FMCSA by UCR resulting from the Notice of Preliminary Rulemaking published on January 24, 2022. The comment updated the fee calculations by using more current data

A Taliban-Russia Team-Up Against ISIS?



Photo Illustration by The Daily Beast

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban are not as lonely as they once were. The pariahs who protected Osama bin Laden and quickly collapsed when the U.S. counter-attacked after September 11, 2001, have been developing contacts with neighboring states and even with Russia, driven out of Afghanistan in 1989.

There's nothing simple about this picture, and, interestingly, it appears partly tied to Russian efforts to oppose the spread in Afghanistan of groups pledging allegiance to the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. That same concern has helped to [forge links](#) between the Taliban and their longtime enemies in Iran.

And the Russian connection is emerging, ironically, at the same time that Afghanistan's Uzbek warlord and vice president, Abdul Rashid Dostum, has openly warmed to his onetime allies in Russia and tried to strengthen ties to the former Soviet states on Afghan frontier.

Dostum visited Moscow and [Grozny this month](#) and launched an offensive just last week in provinces near the Turkmenistan border. Dostum lumped the Taliban together with Daesh, a common Arabic acronym for the Islamic state, on his enemies list.

"The countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States from Russia to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, all these states are willing to stand with us against Daesh [one of the acronyms for the so-called Islamic State], against extremism, against the bloodthirsty Taliban," Dostum [declared](#).

But The Daily Beast has learned that Russia and some of these neighboring states may be playing a double game, or, at the very least keeping their options open if the Taliban manage to retake power.

A former Afghan Taliban governor and member of the group's military committee, who does not want to be cited by name, tells The Daily Beast that "the American global attitude and the threat from ISIS makes for a convergence of Taliban and Russian interests, and we could not rule out further cooperation, depending on the emerging scenario in the Middle East."

That is, if Russia proves successful in its Syrian venture to defend the Assad dictatorship (which is [far from certain](#)), the Taliban will be encouraged to increase their contacts and perhaps cooperation with the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But for now the contacts with Moscow are being kept very quiet and often

are conducted through cut-outs. The main venue for the talks is Tajikistan, just north of Afghanistan's embattled Kunduz province, whose intelligence operatives may have been involved with a substantial shipment of arms to the Taliban. The government and intelligence services of Tajikistan are understood by the Taliban to have remained close clients of Moscow.

"Tajikistan is under the extreme influence of the Russians, so whatever happened, it's not possible without Russians approval," said the former Taliban governor.

When the Taliban seized the city of Kunduz at the end of last month, the group's new leader, [Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansoor](#), was careful to say that the Taliban presented no threat and had not intention of infiltrating beyond Afghanistan's borders.

Some sources suggest the contacts go back to 2013 and were opened at the request of the Russians, but the clearest narrative is much more recent.

One central figure is Dr. Tahir Shamalzi, the younger brother of a former Taliban leader, who headed a delegation of what's widely known as the Taliban "ransom and peace committee" that visited the Tajikistan capital of Dushanbe last May. At the time, the Taliban were holding prisoner four [Tajikistan border guards](#) who apparently had been sent across the river that marks the frontier with Afghanistan to cut wood.

Shamalzai was traveling with a fake passport, according to our sources. The intermediary for the talks in Dushanbe allegedly is one Ibrahim Achakzai, who has a scrap metal business there.

In exchange for the guards' release, the Taliban wanted weapons. "Dr. Tahir Shamalzai traveled from Kabul airport to Dushanbe, inspected the weapons, and crossed with the weapons from Tajikistan into Afghanistan," a senior

Taliban leader tells The Daily Beast.

How many weapons? Our sources use words like "big" and "significant," but won't go into details. A Taliban sub-commander in Kunduz who goes by the name Qari Omar tells The Daily Beast that the then-commander of forces there, Mullah Rahmatullah, was pleased with the deal and gave the four Tajik guards turbans and Afghan dress before turning them over to a Tajik border post.

As it happens, Mullah Rahmatullah was killed in Kunduz during the U.S.-led bombing that accompanied the government counterattack, which had a certain air of desperation after a major city had fallen to the Taliban for the first time since 2001.

"Of course the weapons we got freshly from the Afghan-Tajik border played a key role in the fight for Kunduz," said Sub-Commander Qari Omar.

A diplomatic source says Pakistan, which has close ties to the Afghan Taliban, is aware of the Taliban contacts with the Russians, and some former Taliban say they are surprised anyone is surprised. "If we could talk to the West, what's wrong talking to Russians and Afghanistan's neighbors in north?" as one put it.

At a peace conference in Qatar last summer, according to Qustad Qari Burahman, who attended on behalf of Hizb Islami Afghanistan (the Hikmatyar group), "A Russian who spoke perfect Pashto was there as an observer. He was called on demand of the Taliban, so there's no doubt about the Taliban and Mosco having contact."

It appears the Taliban and Russians first made direct contact in mid-2013 to discuss the fate of a Russian pilot captured after his helicopter made an emergency landing in an area near Kabul under Taliban influence.

"That release was also part of a weapons and money deal," a senior Afghan leader told The Daily Beast.

Taliban sources says Dr. Tahir Shamalzi and others have made several trips to China as well as to the former Soviet republics. China is said to be concerned about a small numbers of East Turkestan Independence Movement fighters, Uyghurs from Xinjiang, who are living in southern Afghanistan.

"We told them they are in Afghanistan, and we could stop them from making anti-Chinese activities, but we could not hand over or displace from our areas," the former Taliban governor told The Daily Beast.

(Afghan government sources, on the other hand, say that last year President Ashraf Ghani handed over several members of the East Turkistan Independence Movement to the Chinese in Kabul.)

Will Taliban contacts with the once-hostile neighbors go far beyond hostage deals? A common refrain in Kabul diplomatic circles contends that the Taliban are turning away from any plans to support international terrorist groups, and focusing on their role as local Afghan resistance fighters opposed not only to Ghani's government and the American presence, but to ISIS as well.

Defense Secretary Expresses Concern Over Russian Support For Taliban

[Tom Bowman](#) 3-Minute Listen

Russia has begun supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan against U.S. forces and the government in Kabul. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis warned in London that the U.S. is "concerned" about this support, first revealed earlier this year, as it weighs the next phase of its approach to the longest-running war in American history.

KELLY MCEVERS, HOST:

The war in Afghanistan of course is still going, and it's getting more complicated. The Pentagon is deciding now about how many more troops to send in cooperation with European allies, and that's after a request from the Pentagon's top general for thousands more troops. And now Defense Secretary Jim Mattis says he's getting concerned about the role Russia is playing in Afghanistan.

NPR Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman is here to talk about this. Hello, Tom.

TOM BOWMAN, BYLINE: Hey, Kelly.

MCEVERS: So what are the Russians doing back in Afghanistan?

BOWMAN: Well, Kelly, at this point, it's pretty murky. We just don't know. Secretary Mattis talked about this just today while on a visit to London. He's saying we've seen Russian activity with the Taliban. And officials say that the

Russians are providing some support, including maybe weapons to the Taliban. They're saying it's a possibility. But the Pentagon won't provide details on this - where they're seeing this and what exactly is happening, so we don't have any clear evidence yet.

Now of course the Taliban already have plenty of weapons - small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, but the Russians could potentially provide even more sophisticated arms and equipment, maybe missiles or night vision goggles, the types of things that could make the Taliban even more lethal.

MCEVERS: OK, so details are murky, but what are officials saying about what the Russian's objective might be in Afghanistan?

BOWMAN: Well, the commander in Afghanistan, General John Nicholson, thinks this is a way for the Russians just to undermine the U.S. and NATO. And of course Russia (laughter) has tried to undermine the U.S., getting involved in the election, also threatening NATO partners in Europe.

Also there's a sense that the Russians want to be a mediator here in Afghanistan just kind of like they are in Syria. They want to be seen as a global operator. So they recently had a meeting in Russia with China and Pakistan to try to come up with some sort of accord in Afghanistan.

Another thing is, the Russians are very concerned about the rise of the Islamic State in Afghanistan. They don't want them on their southern border, so the Taliban apparently are reaching out to the Russians, saying, we would like help from you, arms and support in fighting the Islamic State. So that's a couple of things we're seeing.

MCEVERS: You know, it's hard to hear you talk about all this and not think about the United States and what it was doing in Afghanistan back in the 1980s and arming fighters who they thought were on their side to fight as

Soviet-occupied fighters in Afghanistan. Could this be part of that too?

BOWMAN: Yeah, I think this could be something of a payback to the United States. Back in the 1980s, the U.S. supplied mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan with shoulder-fired missiles to fight the Russian presence there. Now, these fighters started bringing down Russian helicopters, ending up bleeding the Russian force there, and that helped push the Russians out of Afghanistan by the end of the decade. And some of these Taliban fighters you're seeing today were also fighting the Russians back then. So (laughter) it potentially - the Russians could be aiding people that were fighting them 30 or 40 years ago.

MCEVERS: Wow. And what about the bigger picture in Afghanistan? If the U.S. does end up sending thousands more troops, what will they do, and would they help bring an end to this war?

BOWMAN: Well, this war's been going on, as you know, for 15 years. There's no sense it's going to end anytime soon. General Nicholson says he would like a few thousand more troops. Some could come from the U.S., some from NATO. It looks like more training and assistance for the Afghan forces. He's putting together his detailed proposal right now, and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis will decide if that makes sense. But you're looking at a Taliban that's growing in strength and an Afghan force that still needs a lot of help.

MCEVERS: NPR Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman, thank you very much.

BOWMAN: You're welcome, Kelly.

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General John Nicholson US Army Retired
President, PENFED Foundation
Former Commander NATO RESOLUTE SUPPORT & US Forces Afghanistan 2016-2018
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
9 July 2020 Russian Bounties

Chairman Engel and Ranking Member McCaul, thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to appear with such a distinguished group of colleagues. As a Soldier, I believe nothing is more important than protecting our national security and the lives of our service members. The issue of Russian involvement in the Afghan War is an essential part of protecting our troops and protecting our progress towards an enduring peace. I thank you for highlighting this issue for the American people.

History tells us that miscalculations and mistakes lead to war. Miscalculations and mistakes between Russia and the United States are especially dangerous because of our substantial nuclear arsenals. The offering of bounties by Russian operatives to the Taliban for killing Americans and our Coalition partners would constitute both a serious miscalculation and a significant mistake on their part.

When I served in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2012, we shared some interests with the Russians in terms of counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics and cooperated with them on military logistics through our Northern Distribution Network. By 2014, when I was the Commander of NATO Allied Land Command in Turkey, things had changed. With the Russian annexation of Crimea, invasion of Ukraine and threatening behavior towards the eastern states of the NATO Alliance, we drafted defensive plans for the first time in the 25 years since the end of the Cold War. In September 2015, they intervened in Syria and tensions worsened. By the time I moved from Turkey to Afghanistan in March of 2016, the Russians had undertaken a significant air and ground campaign to prop up the Assad regime.

From 2016-2018, while the primary US focus was on Syria and ISIS, there was a growth of Russian presence in Central Asia. No doubt some of this was motivated by uncertainty over US intentions and the potential instability which would follow a US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. The pattern was similar to what we had seen in the Baltics, Crimea, Ukraine and Syria where military exercises were used to move capabilities into an area; desensitize the US and NATO Allies to their presence and intentions and reduce our warning times. Capability creates options and they were positioning capabilities to have options to play a larger role.

They also began arming and funding Taliban elements across northern and eastern Afghanistan. They justified these actions with a false narrative that the United States was supporting the Islamic State Khorasan Province (the Afghan affiliate of ISIS) with the intent to destabilize central Asia and Russia, a narrative they promoted at the highest levels.

At the time, my conclusion was that Russian support to the Taliban was 'calibrated'. The Taliban wanted anti-aircraft missiles, but the Russians didn't provide them. However, they

provided enough small arms, ammo and money to sustain the Taliban in the fight and gain influence in advance of an anticipated US/NATO withdrawal. While this assistance did not significantly alter the tactical balance on the battlefield, it helped the Taliban inflict more casualties on the Afghan security forces and more hardship on the Afghan people. This was particularly relevant in the north of Afghanistan, the Kunduz area. In this sense, the Russians sought to undermine the US and NATO and further destabilize Afghanistan. Within US Forces Afghanistan at the time, we highlighted the growing Russian capabilities up the chain of command and took measures to better monitor their activities. We publicized their support to the Taliban through US and NATO channels and countered their false narratives in public.

Despite all of this, I was somewhat surprised to read stories of Russian involvement in bounties, a risky and irresponsible move which would mark a departure from their previously calibrated approach. The layers of complexity in Afghanistan coupled with shifting internal Russian dynamics will take some time to decipher. But if this is validated, regardless of who made the decision or where it was made, regardless of whether Russian leaders were complicit or merely incompetent in their failure to control operations, they are still responsible.

It's important to note that, there were two sides to this transaction. Russians offered and the Taliban accepted. Deliberate attacks on Americans and our Coalition partners are in violation of the spirit and letter of the peace agreement. Along with continued high levels of Taliban violence, this action further reveals that the Taliban are not meeting conditions for advancement of the peace process.

If we assess that Russia put bounties on American and Coalition lives, what should we do in response?

1. Condemn this action from the highest levels of the United States government and NATO so the Russians understand it is unacceptable and undermines any chance of improving relations and cooperation on areas of mutual interest.
2. With respect to Russia, suspend any troop withdrawals from Germany. These troop withdrawals play into Russian desires to undermine and weaken NATO. If carried out despite these bounties, this will be viewed as a sign of American weakness in the face of Russian threats. Thank you for considering an NDAA that includes a provision which "bans the administration from lowering troop levels below current levels until 180 days after Pentagon leaders present a plan to Congress and certify it will not harm U.S. or allied interests."
3. With respect to the Taliban, hold the troop drawdown in Afghanistan at the present level until the Taliban meet conditions stipulated in the peace agreement. We have delivered on our part of the peace agreement in drawing down to 8600 troops ahead of schedule; the Taliban must deliver on theirs. We should not resume our drawdown until they meet the required conditions which include severing ties with Al Qaeda, intra-Afghan peace negotiations and a sustained reduction in violence. Thank you for including the Crow/Cheney amendment in the current NDAA.

Conclusion. Our long war in Afghanistan will only end at the peace table. The current peace process rests on a foundation of hard-fought gains by the Afghan security forces supported by America and its coalition partners. In recent months, each time we see progress towards peace, we see an increase in violence by the Taliban who are supported by Russia. Russia's support, while calibrated in the past, is designed to undermine the success of the peace process and erode our will. As leaders, we all have a moral responsibility to do everything in our power to protect our service members who are fighting for an enduring peace in Afghanistan and deliver on the sacrifice of those Americans, Coalition members and Afghans who came before them.

Putin to team up with the TALIBAN to wipe out Islamic State – and give

VLADIMIR Putin's attack on Islamic State took a menacing turn today after it was claimed Russia was to team up with the TALIBAN to wipe out the evil jihadis.



GETTY/IG

Vladimir Putin is considering teaming up with the Taliban to destroy ISIS

The Russian supremo wants to enlist the support of Afghan warlords once loyal to Osama Bin Laden to help him obliterate the jihadi hate group.

In return Mr Putin would supply the fundamentalist group with heavy weapons and vow to support it internationally should it retake control of the country from the unstable Afghan government.

Related articles



[WATCH: Russia wipes out ISIS supply line as Putin continues his...](#)



[Desperate ISIS posts photos of young jihadis at terror school as...](#)

Officials from Moscow have been meeting senior Taliban leadership in shadowy conferences to discuss the possibility of an unlikely alliance.

Sources suggest the talks have been going on for two years and were instigated by Russia, which has recently upped the dialogue as it looks to bring Taliban fighters on its side.



EPA

Mr Putin is trying to shore up the regime of Bashar al-Assad

Such a move could be enticing to Moscow because it would avoid the need to deploy Russian boots on the ground to achieve an all-out strategic victory which would prove a huge embarrassment to the West.

A former Taliban governor and member of the group's military committee said: "The American global attitude and the threat from ISIS makes for a convergence of Taliban and Russian interests, and we could not rule out further cooperation, depending on the emerging scenario in the Middle East."

Such an alliance could prove the [final deadly blow for ISIS, which is in full-on retreat from Russian airstrikes in Syria.](#)



GETTY

An Iraqi soldier stands in a captured ISIS arms depot



REUTERS

Russia has pounded ISIS targets in a relentless bombing campaign

If we could talk to the West what's

It is understood high-ranking officials from Moscow have been secretly meeting Taliban leaders in the former Soviet state of Tajikistan.

wrong talking to Russians?

Taliban source

Intelligence operatives said the discussions, which began in 2013 and involve the smuggling of significant arms shipments to the Taliban, have more recently turned towards the topic of a common fight against ISIS.

They also claimed heavy weaponry smuggled through Tajikistan played a crucial role in the terror group being able to take the Afghan city of Kunduz.

The conquest, which was the first a major city had fallen to the Taliban in 15 years, prompted a panicked response from the West which ended in the US bombing a charity hospital, killing doctors and patients.

Any alliance between Russia and the Taliban would come as a surprise given the latter's links to the Mujahideen resistance group, which successfully fought Moscow's occupation of Afghanistan throughout the Eighties.

But Pakistan's secret service, which has close ties to the Afghan Taliban, is said to be aware of contact between the two, and one former Taliban commander said the lure of defeating ISIS would outweigh any historical animosity.

They said: "If we could talk to the West, what's wrong talking to Russians and Afghanistan's neighbours in north.

DON'T MISS



[Putin's chilling three-word warning to NATO in full after Finland and Sweden join alliance](#)



[Why Nato has compared China to Russia - and what it means for the West](#)

ISIS has been pegged back in recent weeks, with Russian airstrikes obliterating dozens of jihadi targets.

The desperate terrorists are now forcing children as young as six to fight for them as their so-called Caliphate slides closer and closer to an all out defeat.

Russia has already sent in its elite Spetsnaz special forces troops to hunt down packs of fleeing jihadis, with Mr Putin hinting he may also be willing to dispatch 150,000 regular troops to wipe out the Islamists' de facto capital Raqqa.



QISHLOQ OVOZI (ARCHIVE)

Majlis Podcast: What Is Happening In Kunduz, And Why Again?

October 08, 2016 11:59 GMT

By Bruce Pannier

The northern Afghan city of Kunduz is under assault again, a year after it was briefly captured by the Taliban. Tens of thousands of civilians have been forced to flee as the Afghan military and Taliban militants fight it out on the streets.

In late September 2015, when the Afghan military retook the city, the Taliban did not flee very far away, making the current battle to a large extent predictable.

What happened in the year between the Taliban attacks on Kunduz? Did the Afghan government take any measures to prevent a repeat of the September 2015 fiasco? And how is it that the Taliban could attack the same city?

RFE/RL gathered a majlis, a panel, to look into those questions.

Moderating the discussion was RFE/RL Media Relations Manager Muhammad Tahir. From Afghanistan, Kamal Safi, a parliamentarian representing Kunduz Province, joined the talk. Also from Afghanistan, the former governor of Kunduz Province, Omar Safi (no relation), took part. From Washington D.C., Barmak Pazhwak, the senior Afghanistan program officer at the U.S. Institute of Peace, participated. And as usual, I was in Prague and had a bit to say also.

The Taliban's brief capture of Kunduz city in September 2015 was a shock to most. The Taliban had been active in the northeastern provinces of Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Takhar but had never seized a provincial capital since it had been driven from power in Afghanistan by the U.S.-led invasion 14 years previously.

The militants were driven out of Kunduz in just a few days, but villagers near Kunduz, and members of the government in Kabul, said many times that the Taliban had only retreated to areas outside the city -- in some cases only a few kilometers away.

Kamal Safi described the current situation, as of October 5. "Apart from a few buildings like the governor's house, the police chief's office, and [a few others], the rest of the city is still [under] the Taliban and they are resisting the offensive of the security forces," he said.

The parliamentarian said civilians were faced with "no electricity, no water. There is no food, all the food shops are closed ... and if any bread is available in some parts of the city, the cost is four or five times higher [than usual]."

Former Kunduz Governor Omar Safi said the problem now was the same as last year. "There is no coordination and there is no interest from the government security forces' side to fight against the enemy." He pointed out that when this latest battle started there were "only one or two dead of the government forces," a sign, Safi said, that government troops had retreated almost as soon as the attack started. (Editors' note: Government forces have since launched a counter-offensive.)

Corruption Hampering Government Efforts

The former governor said that when the Taliban staged the September 2015 attack on Kunduz "we had only one regiment in Kunduz." The Afghan government did reinforce troops in Kunduz. "There are three battalions," Safi said, "So there are around almost 18,000 troops in Kunduz Province."

Pazhwak said: "The Afghan government hasn't been able to establish a control and command structure for this war in Kunduz that is unified and well-coordinated among the different security forces of the country."

But as has happened in so many other places in Afghanistan, corruption is playing a large part in the failures of government forces. [Omar] Safi said, "President [Ashraf] Ghani approved 550 million Afghani to Kunduz city, just to make a security belt for Kunduz." But unfortunately, "this money was all lost, misused" and he added none of the planned 17 security bases that were to have surrounded Kunduz city were ever built.

There are other reasons why government forces were struggling to pacify Kunduz Province. Pazhwak noted: "Kunduz, unfortunately, is practically a divided province. It is divided among a few power brokers, warlords, and a patronage system that could be traced all the way to Kabul."

Parliamentarian Safi added: "Kunduz is known as a small Afghanistan in the sense that all tribes who live in Afghanistan live in Kunduz as well, from all the small tribes [and] big tribes."

'Russian Buffer Zone'

But former Kunduz Governor Safi offered another interesting reason the Taliban were so difficult to suppress in Kunduz Province. "Most important is their [Taliban] recent ties with the Russians to keep this as a buffer zone for Russia to prevent [Islamic State] infiltration to a former Russian state like Tajikistan."

Tajikistan's Asia-Plus independent news agency reported on December 29, 2015, that Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov confirmed that Taliban representatives from northern Afghanistan met with Russian officials at an air base Russia's military used in Tajikistan. The Asia-Plus report named one of the Taliban officials as being "Qori Dinmuhammad Hanif, a commander of the Taliban from northern Afghanistan," and the report said Russian officials had met not once, but several times with Taliban officials at the base in Tajikistan, seemingly without the Tajik government's knowledge.

The report continued that government forces were unable to dislodge Hanif's forces from a district in Badakhshan Province, east of Kunduz Province, because "it [the district] is guarded with Russian weapons."

Former Governor Safi said local militiamen, called Arbaky, often simply paramilitary groups loyal to local warlords, had "seen some huge ammunition ships coming from the Tajik side to the Taliban side to distribute."

Outside of Ambassador Kabulov's comments, Russian officials have not spoken publicly about meetings or contacts with Taliban representatives.

Parliamentarian Safi would say only that "Kunduz has a long border with Central Asia and ... regional interests have changed." He added: "We also cannot deny that some of the local commanders, apart from the Taliban, have [made] frequent visits [to] the Central Asian states."

Our guests discussed these topics in greater detail, especially providing information about the complicated situation in Kunduz that seems to indicate there is no possibility for any resolution, anytime soon.

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COMMENTARY

Russia and the Taliban: Prospective Partners?

Dr Samuel Ramani

14 September 2021

🕒 6 Minute Read

Russia's cautious accommodation of the Taliban shows it will likely combine diplomacy with deterrence in the coming months.

Since Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled Kabul on 15 August, Russia has cautiously accommodated the Taliban's seizure of power. Diplomats, such as Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov and President Vladimir Putin's envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov, have praised the Taliban's contributions to

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security in Kabul and the struggle against Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). While Russia has no immediate plans to afford diplomatic recognition to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Putin recently stated that Moscow will engage with the Taliban as soon as it ‘enters the family of civilized people’.

Russia’s accommodation of Afghanistan’s new political order reflects the impact of more than a decade of clandestine and public diplomacy with the Taliban. However, it masks Russia’s serious reservations about the Taliban’s long-term consolidation of power and purported commitment to combating transnational terrorism. Instead of establishing a partnership with the Islamic Emirate, like Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid recently predicted, Russia’s strategy towards Afghanistan will synthesise diplomacy and deterrence. This strategy will allow it to maintain cordial relations with the Taliban, while assuaging the legitimate security concerns of its Central Asian partners.

Russia's Prospects of Diplomatic Engagement with the Taliban

Although Russia labelled it as a terrorist organisation in 2003, Moscow has maintained a longstanding informal diplomatic relationship with the Taliban. In 2007, Russia held clandestine talks with the Taliban on the prevention of drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Central Asia. These negotiations produced few results, as Russia opened its airspace for US military operations against the Taliban in 2009 and collaborated with the US on anti-narcotics raids in 2010. Russia's engagement with the Taliban revived in 2015, as the threat of ISIS-K grew. In December 2015, Kabulov stated that Russia had established communication channels to exchange information with the Taliban and argued that the Taliban's desire to combat ISIS-K objectively coincided with Moscow's interests.

The expansion of Russia-Taliban dialogue

caused alarm in Kabul and Washington. In December 2016, the Afghan Foreign Ministry cautioned **external powers**, such as Russia, against elevating the Taliban's stature, as it could create long-term threats to regional and international security. Afghan lawmaker Shinkai Karokhail subsequently **claimed** that Russia provided assistance to the Taliban, as it wished to prolong the US war in Afghanistan. In March 2018, the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, John Nicholson, alleged that Russian weapons were smuggled across the Tajik border to the Taliban. Nicholson **asserted** that Russia inflated the ISIS-K threat to provide a justification for military assistance to the Taliban. The Russian Foreign Ministry has repeatedly denied reports that Moscow had **supplied weaponry** to the Taliban.

During my interviews with Russian experts and officials from 2017–19, two narratives about Russian security cooperation with the Taliban surfaced. The first was that Russia provided token arms transfers to the Taliban as a symbolic trust-building

gift. The second was that Russia viewed the Taliban as a potential partner in their efforts to retaliate against threatening US actions, such as the February 2018 Battle of Khasham which killed Russian private military contractors (PMCs). Both narratives were undergirded by Russia's belief that the Taliban could be a trustworthy partner. Russia's hosting of the Moscow-format peace negotiations from 2017–19, which often included the Taliban and excluded President Ashraf Ghani, strengthened person-to-person links between Russian and Taliban officials. While these talks officially aimed to end the war in Afghanistan, they also gave Russia negotiating partners within the Taliban, which could be invaluable in the event of a Central Asian security crisis.

Now that the Taliban are the ruling authority within Afghanistan, Russia hopes to translate this diplomatic experience into security and economic cooperation. While Russia has ruled out military-technical cooperation or arms transfers to the Taliban, Moscow could still

view the Islamic Emirate as a partner against ISIS-K. Zhirnov claims that Russia could invest in Afghanistan's vast untapped mineral reserves and believes that the Taliban could partake in transport and energy projects with Central Asian states. Russia also supports the removal of asset freezes against the Taliban and has urged the international community to aid Afghanistan's reconstruction from four decades of conflict.

Risks to Russia's Interests

Although Russia's diplomacy with the Taliban leaves it better equipped to manage a spillover of instability from Afghanistan than during the Islamic Emirate's first stint in power from 1996–2001, Moscow still has reasons to be concerned about Taliban rule. Russian experts fear that the Taliban's hold on power might be more tenuous than it appears, and that Afghanistan could potentially succumb to a new civil war. Andrei Kortunov, the director-general of

the Russian International Affairs Council, expressed concerns that the Taliban will struggle to exert control over northern Afghanistan and this vulnerability, combined with the sharp deterioration of the Afghan economy, could result in the emergence of Al-Qa'ida and Islamic State cells. Omar Nessar, an expert at the Institute of Oriental Studies, warned that the Taliban's unwillingness to give up violence could cause the Afghan security forces to struggle to maintain stability.

Due to these risks, Russian officials urged the Taliban to create an inclusive coalition government and ameliorate intra-state conflicts through diplomacy. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recently stated that an Afghan government should include non-Pashtun ethnic groups, such as Hazaras, Uzbeks and Tajiks. Lavrov also emphasised the need for a diplomatic settlement between the Taliban and the Ahmad Massoud-led National Resistance Front in Panjshir Valley. The Taliban's appointment of a government on 7 September, which is almost exclusively

Pashtun and largely comprised of holdovers from their first stint in power, clashes with Russia's recommendations. While Zhirnov will attend the Islamic Emirate's inauguration ceremony, this should not be viewed as a sign of Moscow's support for Taliban appointments.

To mitigate against instability in a Taliban-led Afghanistan, Russia is pursuing three policies. First, Russia is strengthening its engagement with Pakistan on Afghan security. Pakistan's *Express Tribune* described Putin's call to Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan, as a 'defining moment' in Russia-Pakistan relations, as it was the 'first-ever tacit acknowledgement that Russia has come to rely on Pakistan to advance its interests'. This does not mean that Russia is behind Pakistan's policies towards Afghanistan. Russian media outlets have expressed concern about the corrosion of Afghanistan's sovereignty that accompanies Pakistan's empowerment of the Haqqani Network, and highlighted the Pakistani military's alleged involvement in the Panjshir Valley offensive. Nevertheless,

Russia views Pakistan as an indispensable backchannel to the Taliban and sees security benefits in strengthening its relationship with Islamabad.

Second, Russia has expanded its security cooperation with India against shared threats emanating from Afghanistan.

Russia's ambassador to India, Nikolay Kudashev, acknowledged that Moscow and New Delhi are both concerned by a spillover of terrorism from Afghanistan, as it poses a threat to Central Asia and Kashmir.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's national security advisor, Ajit Doval, and his Russian counterpart, Nikolay Patrushev, have also discussed upgrading Russia-India cooperation against terrorism and narcotics trafficking. Third, Russia is deepening its coordination with its Central Asian partners on Afghan security. The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization launched three days of military exercises in Kyrgyzstan, as it wished to mitigate threats emanating from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have also held joint military

exercises with Russia, while Rosoboronexport has agreed to sell arms to Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan.

Although Russia's official statements on the Taliban are optimistic in tone, they belie growing uncertainties in Moscow about the Islamic Emirate's ability to stabilise Afghanistan. In the months ahead, Russia will likely combine diplomacy with deterrence, as it seeks to mitigate security threats and capitalise on nascent commercial opportunities in Afghanistan.

The views expressed in this Commentary are the author's, and do not represent those of RUSI or any other institution.

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Russia Backs Taliban Call to Withdraw Foreign Troops

Russia this week said it supports the Taliban's demand for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan and that this call by the insurgent group was "justified".

According to a Bloomberg report, President Vladimir Putin's special envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, said in an interview in Moscow that the Taliban's call was "justified" in terms of opposing foreign military presence.

"Who's in favor? Name me one neighboring state that supports it," he asked.

In response to these comments, Sediq Sediqqi, head of Afghanistan's Government Media and Information Center (GMIC), said on twitter that "Russia ties and links with Taliban will encourage this group (Taliban) to intensify their attacks on civilians as ANSF have defeated them on the ground!"

He also said this could lead to the Taliban and other terrorist groups turning "Afghanistan again into a terrorist safe haven."

This comes amid growing tension between Russia and the U.S over Afghanistan.

Late last year, Russian officials confirmed that they had been in contact with the Taliban in a bid to get them to return to the peace talks tables.

However, the U.S has accused Russia of supplying weapons to the insurgent group.

According to Bloomberg, Kabulov accused the U.S of sabotaging Russian efforts to help end the Afghan war by boycotting a Moscow meeting planned for mid-April between Afghanistan and other regional countries.

Kabulov blamed the U.S decision on a fit of pique that Russia is taking the lead, and suggested that the military establishment in Washington is undermining U.S President Donald Trump's campaign pledge to cooperate with Russia in fighting terrorism, Bloomberg reported.

"The U.S won't tell us and others what to do in Afghanistan," Kabulov said.

Bloomberg meanwhile quoted Petr Topychkanov, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center as having said Russia "views American bases in Afghanistan as a threat to its interests" and is maneuvering to maximize its influence by keeping channels of communication open with all sides.

Russia has been engaging with the Taliban for years. The U.S. withdrawal might give it an opportunity to expand its role.

August 21, 2021 / 10:01 AM

By Mary Ilyushina

Moscow — In the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan following the [chaotic withdrawal of U.S. forces](#) this week, Russia sees an opportunity to step up its role as a regional power in its own backyard. But it also faces a host of risks, prompting the country to pursue a dual approach: diplomacy with the Taliban and displays of strength along its border.

The Kremlin appears to be [willing to engage with the Taliban](#) in order to secure its interests. Since the group took over Kabul, Moscow representatives have cautiously reached out for talks to secure its diplomatic compounds in the area. Russian ambassador to Afghanistan Dmitry Zhirnov even publicly praised the Taliban on Russian state TV.

"We are now being guarded by the Taliban, their big unit. They made a good impression on us, adequate guys, well-armed, they stood along the outer perimeter of the embassy so that no one could penetrate us — no terrorist, no crazy person," Zhirnov said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, hinted Russia might recognize the Taliban as a governing force depending on their next moves, which could be a major win for the militants. Russian diplomats have also praised the Taliban over the "puppet

government" of Ashraf Ghani, the president who fled Afghanistan and resurfaced in the UAE. Russia only partially evacuated its embassy.

"I judge based on the first day of their control over Kabul. My impressions are good. The situation in Kabul now is better than it was under Ashraf Ghani. That is, under the Taliban terrorists it is better than under Ghani," Zhirnov said.

Russia put the Taliban on its terrorist list back in 2003 but welcomed Taliban representatives for talks since 2018, bypassing Ghani's administration. In July, the Taliban even hosted a press conference in Moscow right after U.S. President Joe Biden's address about the "orderly drawdown" of American troops.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has made the fight against terrorism the cornerstone of his presidency, justifying the country's involvement in Syria and backing authoritarian leader Bashar al-Assad as a way to uphold stability.

But in Afghanistan, realpolitik goals are at play as Russia is growing concerned that the movement's ideas of Islamic fundamentalism could spill over to Muslim-majority former Soviet states allied with Moscow.

While exploring diplomatic ways to interact with the Taliban, Moscow also made sure to project force by holding joint military exercises in Tajikistan and China near the Afghan border, with the latter aimed at "demonstrating the determination and ability... to fight terrorism."

"The goal is not to allow the expansion of Taliban outside of Afghanistan and to make the rule of Taliban as small as possible compared to its previous version," Alexander Baunov, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center, told CBS News. "Russia is not interested in having a new ISIS on its border."

The Russian military also announced this week that Russian troops will take part in a monthlong exercise with Tajikistan. Under a collective security treaty with regional states, Moscow has an obligation to deploy forces in case one of those states is under attack.

Another potential headache for Moscow is the wave of [refugees fleeing Afghanistan](#). Russia rarely offers asylum but might be faced with a surge of Afghans who are currently trying to get to neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

"The U.S. shoved off the burden of wasteful spending as soon as it became clear that its strategic goal of controlled chaos was being realized without their presence. All obligations and all risks were left to us (guess where the stream of refugees will now rush, as well as at whose expense the borders and armies of the Central Asian states will be strengthened? ..), and they got into a beautiful machine and flew away," columnist Daria Mitina wrote in the Moscow-friendly Vedomosti newspaper.

Moscow has its own painful history of a failed military mission in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to prop up a communist government that was fighting against guerrilla fighters and expecting to withdraw within a year.

They were met with brutal resistance and the war went on for nine years instead, killing as many as 2 million Afghans and nearly 15,000 Soviet troops. Fighters from the anti-Soviet Mujahideen later helped set up the Taliban in the 1990s.

History repeated itself as U.S.-allied forces fled over the Friendship Bridge, the same one Soviet troops used more than 30 years ago to march out, which evoked some gloating in the Kremlin.

In Moscow, the botched withdrawal of U.S. forces is seen as a major setback for American foreign policy, scoring points for Putin's idea of a "multi-polar world," which rejects U.S. efforts to promote democracy around the world.

"In Afghanistan, the myth of the omnipotence of U.S. military power has been destroyed. Abandoned bases and the inability to ensure security and operation of a mere airport are powerful symbols [of that]," Konstantin Kosachev, Russian senator in charge of the International Affairs Committee, wrote on Facebook. "From now on, it's not bombs that are being dropped from American planes, it's living people. And they leave 'their own people' without the slightest embarrassment. Some of our neighbors are concerned for a reason."

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Russia is sending weapons to Taliban, top U.S. general confirms

[Thomas Gibbons-Neff](#) April 24, 2017 at 12:56 p.m. EDT

KABUL — The general in charge of U.S. forces in Afghanistan appeared to confirm Monday that Russia is sending weapons to the Taliban, an intervention that will probably further complicate the 15-year-old war here and the Kremlin's relations with the United States.

When asked by reporters, Gen. John Nicholson did not dispute claims that the Taliban is receiving weapons and other supplies from the Russians.

"We continue to get reports of this assistance," Nicholson said, speaking to reporters alongside Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. "We support anyone who wants to help us advance the reconciliation process, but anyone who arms belligerents who perpetuate attacks like the one we saw two days ago in Mazar-e Sharif is not the best way forward to a peaceful reconciliation."

[*While the U.S. wasn't looking, Russia and Iran began carving out a bigger role in Afghanistan*](#)

A senior U.S. military official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence on the issue, said the Russians have increased their supply of equipment and small arms to the Taliban over the past 18 months. The official said the Russians have been sending weapons, including medium and heavy machine guns, to the Taliban under the guise that the materiel would be used to fight the Islamic State in eastern Afghanistan. Instead, the official said, the weapons were showing up in some of Afghanistan's southern provinces, including Helmand and Kandahar — both areas with little Islamic State presence.

"Any weapons being funneled here from a foreign country would be a violation of international law unless they were coming to the government of Afghanistan," Mattis said, speaking during his first visit to Afghanistan as defense secretary. He added that it would have to be dealt with as such.

In the past, Nicholson has criticized Russia's contact with the Taliban, saying that it has given "legitimacy" to a group that has undermined the elected government in Kabul.

In the 1980s, Russia fought its own war in Afghanistan, losing thousands of troops to insurgents supplied with advanced U.S. weaponry, such as shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles. In March, when the commander of U.S. forces in Europe, Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, told lawmakers that Russia was providing support to the Taliban, the Russian Foreign Ministry dismissed the allegations as "a lie" and said the charge was being promulgated to disguise Washington's policy failures in Afghanistan.

Soldiers at an Afghan military base were targeted as they ate dinner and left a mosque follow prayers on April 21.
(Video: Reuters)

Mattis and Nicholson's remarks come just days after the Taliban pulled off the single deadliest attack against Afghan security forces since the beginning of the war.

[*U.S. defense chief arrives in Kabul as his Afghan counterpart resigns in disgrace*](#)

On Friday, roughly a dozen militants infiltrated a sprawling Afghan base near the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif. Using suicide bomb vests and small arms, the militants — disguised as Afghan soldiers — wreaked havoc at the installation and, according to some reports, killed at least 140 Afghans and wounded 60.

The six-hour assault began as Afghan soldiers were leaving their weekly prayers or ambling to the base's dining facility. The Taliban fighters were eventually killed by a response force led by Afghan commandos. Nicholson praised the elite but overworked unit's actions for bringing the "atrocities to an end."

It is unclear how the attack will affect Afghan forces' recruitment efforts, already strained by high casualties and low retention rates among the ranks. The Taliban has pledged that the attack is just the beginning of its annual spring offensive. However, since U.S. combat troops mostly withdrew in 2014, the pace of Taliban attacks has remained consistent across the country year-round.

There are 8,400 U.S. troops in Afghanistan split between two roles. One contingent helps advise the Afghan security forces while the other carries out unilateral and partnered counterterrorism operations against groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. In addition to the U.S. troops, roughly 5,000 NATO troops are in Afghanistan, split among various areas of responsibility.

Nicholson and the chief of U.S. Central Command, Army Gen. Joseph Votel, have agreed that roughly 3,000 additional troops are needed to help prop up the Afghan security forces and break what top U.S. officials have called a "stalemate" in the country. At the height of the war, more than 100,000 U.S. troops were in the country.

Mattis said Monday that he is still deciding whether to ask President Trump to send more troops.

[At least 140 dead after Taliban attack on a key Afghan army base, officials say](#)

[Some in Afghanistan question U.S. choice to use 22,000-pound bomb against ISIS](#)

Russia is sharing information with the Taliban to fight the Islamic State

[Andrew Roth](#) December 23, 2015 at 1:25 p.m. EST



An Afghan police officer keeps watch during a battle with the Taliban in Helmand province, where militants stormed a major opium-poppy-growing district this week. (Noor Mohammad/AFP via Getty Images)

MOSCOW — A Kremlin official said Wednesday that Russia was exchanging information with the Taliban, the Islamist insurgency that the United States has been fighting in Afghanistan since 2001, as a bulwark against the spread of the Islamic State militant group in that country.

Zamir Kabulov, a Foreign Ministry department head and President Vladimir

Putin's special representative for Afghanistan, told the Interfax news agency that "the Taliban interest objectively coincides with ours" in the fight against the Islamic State, which has captured broad swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq.

"I have already said earlier that we and the Taliban have channels for exchanging information," Kabulov added, in remarks reported by Interfax and confirmed to The Washington Post by a ministry spokesman.

[The Islamic State creates a new type of jihadist: Part terrorist, part gangster](#)

A limited partnership with the Taliban, which announced last week that it would send "special forces" to fight the Islamic State, is a striking, and somewhat confusing, twist in Russia's war on terror. Although Russia plunged enthusiastically into its airstrike campaign against the Islamic State in Syria in September (critics say Russia is mainly there to prop up President Bashar al-Assad), Moscow has opposed the Taliban for more than a decade as a potential vehicle for terror and instability in the former Soviet Union.

Along with the Islamic State, the Taliban is on a Russian government list of terrorist organizations. Similar to the Islamic State, the Taliban is known for staging brutal public executions and imposing an extreme interpretation of Islamic law on the territories it has captured.

[Iraq turns to Russia in fight against Islamic State](#)

The grueling 14-year-old war in Afghanistan sparked by the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks has killed more than 3,400 troops from a U.S.-led NATO coalition and left the Taliban diminished but not defeated. In September, the Taliban captured the northern Afghan city of Kunduz for 15 days, the first major city captured by the Taliban since the U.S.-led invasion.

Although there are signs that the popularity of the Islamic State is growing in Afghanistan, including the [mysterious Caliphate Radio station](#) that broadcasts Islamic State propaganda every morning, the Taliban remains a far more potent force there.

After the capture of Kunduz, Russia reinforced its 201st Motorized Rifle Division military base in Tajikistan, a former Soviet republic that borders Afghanistan, sending attack helicopters in what was widely seen as a response to the resurgence of the Taliban in a city less than five miles from the border with Tajikistan.

[Russia and Turkey accuse each other of buying oil from the Islamic State](#)

In the same interview on Wednesday, Kabulov said Russia would be "ready to supply weapons but will do it with due prudence and mostly on a commercial basis" to Afghanistan. Those weapons would probably be used against the Taliban, which this week launched an offensive aimed at a strategically important district in Helmand province.

Maria Zakharova, a spokeswoman for the Foreign Ministry, said by telephone that Russia's only shared interest with the Taliban is the fight against the Islamic State.

She also said that contacts between Russia and the Taliban have been limited. There has been "no travel, no meetings. It's only information exchange," she said.

Zakharova said that Russia was maintaining a sanctions regime imposed on the Taliban by the U.N. Security Council and that no material support had been supplied to the group.

She declined to discuss what information had been shared.

Russia Says Trying To Push Afghan Taliban To Join National Reconciliation



Russia's ambassador to NATO, Aleksandr Grushko

Russia says it is in contact with the Taliban in Afghanistan to push the militant group toward national reconciliation and to ensure the security of Russian citizens.

Speaking to reporters in Brussels on March 31, Russia's ambassador to NATO, Aleksandr Grushko, denied that Moscow is providing aid to the Taliban and said "many countries" maintain contacts with the group.

"The consultations we hold, the work we do, we do it with the participation of Afghanistan's central government," Grushko said.

Earlier, in London, U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis expressed concern over Russia's interaction with the Taliban, which is fighting the U.S.-backed government and U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

"I am not willing to say at this point if that is manifested into weapons and that sort of thing, but, certainly, what they are up to there in light of their other activities gives us concern," Mattis said.

The comments came after U.S. General Curtis Scaparrotti, NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe, [said on March 23](#) that he had seen evidence of increasing Russian efforts to influence the Taliban "and perhaps even to supply" the militant group.

Based on reporting by TASS and Interfax

Top U.S. Commander In Afghanistan Accuses Russia Of Aiding Taliban

[Scott Neuman](#) March 26, 2018 3:46 AM ET

Gen. John Nicholson, the top American commander in Afghanistan, speaks to reporters last week at Bagram air base north of Kabul, Afghanistan.

Robert Burns/AP

Russia has fired back at accusations by U.S. Army Gen. John Nicholson that the Kremlin is providing material support to the Taliban.

In [an interview with the BBC last week](#), Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, said in an interview taped there: "We've had weapons brought to this headquarters and given to us by Afghan leaders and [they] said this was given by the Russians to the Taliban."

"Clearly, they are acting to undermine our interests," he said.

As [NPR Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman reported last year](#), it is not the first time that the four-star general has made the accusation. Last year, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis also discussed the concern.

A statement by the Russian embassy in Kabul dismissed Nicholson's comments as "idle gossip."

"Once again, we insist that such statements are absolutely baseless and appeal to officials not to talk nonsense," [the embassy said](#).

Officials in Russia have said they only have limited contacts with the Taliban and that they are aimed at encouraging peace talks and protecting Russian citizens.

Afghan officials last year also called on Moscow to halt its support for the Taliban.

In October, Brig. Gen. Mohammad Naser Hedayat, the commander of the Afghan army's 207th Corps, said Russia was "actively meddling in Farah [province]."

"We have seized Russian-made weapons, including night-vision sniper scopes," he said.

As [The Guardian wrote at the time](#): "Russia's recent push for influence in Afghanistan follows a pattern across the region, where Moscow has challenged American influence in Libya, Turkey, Syria and the Gulf. But it also offers an echo of history for Afghans who since the 19th century have seen their country treated as a battleground for rival foreign powers."

In [an appearance before a Senate Armed Services Committee in Feb. 2017](#), Nicholson had this exchange with Florida Democrat Sen. Bill Nelson:

"If Russia is cozying up to the Taliban — and that's a kind word — if they are giving equipment that we have some evidence that the Taliban is getting ... and other things that we can't mention in this unclassified setting? And the Taliban is also associated with al-Qaida? Therefore Russia indirectly is helping al-Qaida in Afghanistan," said Nelson.

"Your logic is absolutely sound, sir," Nicholson replied.

At the time, Nicholson said the Russian operations in Afghanistan had resumed the previous year [2016].

Russia has a long and tortured history in Afghanistan. In 1979, Soviet forces invaded the country following a coup that overthrew the Kremlin-backed government there.

Local fighters, who called themselves mujahedeen, formed a fierce resistance to the Soviet occupation. During the Reagan administration, the U.S., with the help of Pakistan, funneled hundreds of million of dollars' worth of weapons to the Afghan resistance.

The 10-year conflict in Afghanistan, which devolved into a quagmire that cost 15,000 Russian soldiers, is widely viewed as a major contributing factor to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

U.S. Suspects Russia Supplying Small Arms to Taliban in Afghanistan

Defense Secretary Mattis, visiting Kabul, said it would be a violation of international law

By [Gordon Lubold](#) and [Habib Khan Totakhil](#)

Updated April 24, 2017 6:39 pm ET



KABUL—U.S. military officials said they have seen an increasing number of small arms provided by the Russian government, including machine guns and anti-aircraft weapons, in the hands of Taliban fighters in Afghanistan over the past 18 months.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who arrived in Kabul on an unannounced visit on Monday, said it would be a violation of international law for Russia to provide the Taliban with weapons.

Military officials have long suspected Russia may be sending weapons to Afghanistan, but have noticed an increase recently, a senior U.S. military official said. The weapons are showing up in Helmand, Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces.

Asked on Monday if the Russians were providing such weapons, Gen. John Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, said, "I'm not refuting that."

Russia has acknowledged [sharing information with Taliban](#) groups in an effort to combat Islamic State, but has denied sending weaponry. Russian officials didn't respond on Monday to a request for comment on the U.S. charges.

The senior U.S. military official said heavier weaponry that could change battlefield dynamics, such as surface-to-air missiles, hadn't appeared in Afghanistan.

"The Russians seem to be choosing to be strategic competitors in a number of areas," Mr. Mattis said, adding that as far as "the level of granularity and the level of success they are achieving, I think the jury is still out on that."

Mr. Mattis said the U.S. would address the issue diplomatically, but would confront Russia if necessary.

"We will have to confront Russia where what they're doing is contrary to international law or denying the sovereignty of other countries," he said. "For example, any weapons being funneled in here, unless they are coming

through the [Afghan] government, would be a violation of international law."

Mr. Mattis arrived in Afghanistan hours after the resignations of his Afghan counterpart and the army chief of staff following the deadliest attack by insurgents on government forces since the war began in 2001.

It was Mr. Mattis's first visit to Afghanistan as defense chief but, as a former Marine general, he was the first commander of American troops here following the U.S.-led invasion after the 2001 terror attacks.

During his visit here, Mr. Mattis and the head of the U.S.-led international military force, Gen. John Nicholson, plan to discuss whether to recommend that President [Donald Trump](#) order additional troop deployments.

In testimony to Congress in February, Gen. Nicholson said a few thousand additional American troops were needed to advise and train Afghan forces.

Currently, there are about 8,500 U.S. personnel, along with around 6,000 soldiers from other members of the international coalition, in Afghanistan in support of the central government in Kabul, which is fighting both the Taliban, the largest insurgency, and the local Islamic State affiliate.

Mr. Mattis's visit comes amid turmoil in the Afghan armed forces. The government of President Ashraf Ghani had no immediate comment on the departures of the defense minister, Abdullah Habibi, and the army chief of staff, Qadam Shah Shahim, and no reasons were given for the moves. Gen. Dawlat Waziri, the Defense Ministry spokesman, said only that Mr. Ghani had accepted their resignations.

[Friday's Taliban attack](#) on a government army base in Balkh province left about 170 people dead, Afghan officials said, after six Taliban fighters infiltrated the heavily guarded base aboard military vehicles and opened fire

in what became a five-hour battle. Five of the militants were killed and a sixth was captured alive by Afghan commandos who had been rushed to join the battle, Afghan military officials said.

Mr. Mattis is winding up [an eight-day trip](#) that has taken him to Riyadh, Cairo, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, as well as Doha and Djibouti. His talks with officials have focused on fighting terrorism and countering what the Trump administration says is Iran's destabilizing influence in the Middle East and North Africa.

*Ehsanullah Amiri in Kabul
contributed to this article.*

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Understanding the Russia-Taliban Connection

Recent media reports underline Russian arms sales to the insurgent group. What is Moscow's end game?

[Samuel Ramani](#)



Credit: [Department of Defense photograph by Lt. j. g. Joe Painter](#)

On July 25, 2017, representatives from two Taliban cells told *CNN* that Russia had [supplied them with guns](#) via its regional ally, Iran. This revelation caused allegations of Russian support for the Taliban to circulate widely across international media outlets. The Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova](#) responded harshly to these rumors, by vehemently denying allegations that the Kremlin has provided military support to the Taliban and alleging that the United States fabricated Moscow's purported Taliban links to further its disinformation campaign against Russia.

While the scale of Russia's military support for the Taliban remains unclear, Moscow's apparent decision to provide arms to the Sunni extremist

organization can be explained by Russia's desire to expand its influence over Afghanistan. By arming the Taliban, Russia aims to displace Pakistan and the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as the Taliban's leading security partner, and to pressure Kabul to embrace its inclusive approach to diplomacy in Afghanistan.

The Rationale Behind Russia's Military Support for the Taliban

Even though negative memories of the 1979-1989 Soviet War in Afghanistan have made Kremlin policymakers very resistant to a potential Russian troop deployment to Afghanistan, Moscow's arms provisions to the Taliban underscore Russia's ambitions of becoming a major political stakeholder in Afghanistan.

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From a strategic standpoint, Russia's alignment with the Taliban enhances its leverage over Afghanistan, as Moscow is seeking to become the principal military backer of a powerful political faction that has few other international supporters.

This strategy allows Russia to compete directly with the United States for influence in Afghanistan, and gives Russia a proxy in the Afghanistan conflict.

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In order to become the Taliban's leading international military partner, however, Russia must dilute Pakistan's influence over the Taliban's day-to-day military operations. Even though Russia-Pakistan relations have improved in recent years and Moscow has actively engaged with Islamabad on stabilizing Afghanistan, Afghan Ambassador to Russia Qayyum Kochai

[told the New York Times](#) in February that Russia is seeking to displace Pakistan as the Taliban's leading international sponsor.

Kochai believes that Russia could achieve this goal, as the Taliban's "lack of free will" makes it vulnerable to subordination by Moscow. Even though Kochai's assessment of the Taliban underestimates the organization's ability to balance diplomatic relationships with major powers, like China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, Russia's ability to supply the Taliban with more sophisticated forms of weaponry than Pakistan could increase the Taliban's long-term dependency on Moscow.

In addition to restricting Pakistan's ability to shape Afghanistan's political trajectory, Russian military support for the Taliban could significantly weaken the GCC's influence over the Taliban. Even though Saudi Arabia formally suspended ties with the Taliban in 2001 and [officially supports](#) Ghani's government, King Salman has allowed Saudi sheikhs and businessmen to provide covert financial assistance to the Taliban, as he fears a Sunni extremist backlash against the Saudi monarchy.

Despite this support, the recent breakdown in relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has raised doubts about the long-term viability of the GCC-Taliban partnership. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has fiercely condemned Qatar's decision to host Taliban representatives, and has repeatedly highlighted the security risks associated with a Doha-Taliban alliance. As the UAE abandoned the Taliban in the days leading up to the 2001 war in Afghanistan, discord within the GCC could remind Taliban officials of the Riyadh-led bloc's unreliability as an ally, and cause the Taliban to pivot towards an alternative external sponsor: Russia.

Russia's decision to arm the Taliban during a period of unprecedented discord within the GCC demonstrates that Moscow is attempting to upstage

Riyadh as a stakeholder in Afghanistan. As Kremlin policymakers believe the Saudi Arabia-Taliban alliance empowers Wahhabi extremists in Central Asia, weakening the GCC's influence over the Taliban could help prevent instability in Afghanistan from diffusing to Russia's Eurasian allies.

The Impact on the Moscow-Kabul Relationship

Even though Russia's Taliban links have strained its relationship with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government, Kremlin policymakers have tried to prevent Kabul-Moscow tensions from spiraling into an open confrontation. To ameliorate tensions with Ghani's government, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has expressed his unequivocal commitment to cordial Kabul-Moscow relations. The Russian state media has also highlighted Ghani's interest in [Russian MI-35 helicopters](#) and Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman [Ashraf Haidari's request](#) for Russian logistical support for the Afghan army and police.

Russia's unwillingness to suspend ties with Ghani's government suggests that Moscow's preferred strategy in Afghanistan is to balance between Kabul and the Taliban, rather than forging a firm alliance with either side. In this context, Russia's arms sales to the Taliban could ultimately motivate a simultaneous improvement in Moscow-Kabul relations.

Russia's arms sales to the Taliban demonstrate to Ghani's government that resisting Moscow's push for inclusive diplomacy has pernicious consequences for Afghanistan's security. As many Kremlin policymakers believe that Ghani's opposition to diplomacy with the Taliban is the product of his subordination to the United States, Moscow's decision to arm the Taliban could be a way of testing the strength of the Kabul-Washington alliance.

The Trump administration's reluctance to expand U.S. military support for

Afghanistan's government after revelations of Russian support for the Taliban could eventually cause strains between Ghani and Trump. An increase in tensions between Kabul and Washington could cause Ghani to launch an aggressive diplomatic outreach to the Taliban to prevent further Russian arms sales to the insurgent group. If Ghani accepts Russia's calls for dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban, under the threat of forceful retaliation from Moscow, Russia will be able to compellingly showcase its influence over Afghanistan to the international community.

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Even though Russian small arms sales to the Taliban are unlikely to significantly shift the balance of power in the Taliban's favor, Moscow's arms provisions could have profound implications for the balance of power in Afghanistan. Russia's military support for the Taliban expands its ability to influence the insurgent organization's activities, dilutes Pakistan's hegemony over the Taliban, and reduces the power projection capacity of its strategic rivals, the United States and Saudi Arabia, in Afghanistan. Therefore, while Russia's arms provisions to the Taliban are unlikely to be publicly confirmed, Moscow's covert security cooperation with the Taliban is likely to remain an enduring feature of the Kremlin's Afghanistan strategy for the foreseeable future.

Samuel Ramani is a DPhil candidate in International Relations at St. Antony's College, University of Oxford. He is also a journalist who writes regularly for the Washington Post and Huffington Post. He can be followed on [Twitter at samramani2](#) and on [Facebook at Samuel Ramani](#).

Why Is Russia Helping Anti-U.S. Insurgents In Afghanistan?

Philip Ewing February 13, 2017 3:21 PM ET

An American soldier scanned the retina of a man in Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan in Dec. 2011. Russia cites the danger of ISIS in Nangarhar as its reason for backing the Taliban, the U.S. says.

[Sgt. Trey Harvey/U.S. Army](#)

Russia is supporting anti-U.S. insurgents in Afghanistan — and through them, terrorists, top U.S. national security leaders say.

What isn't clear is why.

The top American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. John Nicholson, stopped short of detailing everything the U.S. knows about the Russian return to Afghanistan in an appearance before a Senate panel last week. But he did confirm some lawmakers' accounts of what U.S. intelligence has established about the relationship.

"If Russia is cozying up to the Taliban — and that's a kind word — if they are giving equipment that we have some evidence that the Taliban is getting ... and other things that we can't mention in this unclassified setting? And the Taliban is also associated with al-Qaida? Therefore Russia indirectly is helping al-Qaida in Afghanistan," said Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla.

"Your logic is absolutely sound, sir," Nicholson said.

Terrorist groups use the Afghan Taliban insurgency as a "medium" in which to operate, Nicholson said, as al-Qaida did before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the U.S.

The disclosures about Russia's operations in Afghanistan, which Nicholson said are increasing after they resumed last year, could complicate any effort by President Trump to work more closely with Moscow on fighting terrorism.

Trump has said he wants Washington and Moscow to do more against the Islamic State in Syria – a goal that already was problematic because Moscow mostly has not been targeting ISIS there. Still, Trump ordered his national security team to present him with a new plan to defeat ISIS, one that could include options for closer cooperation with Moscow, as soon as next week.

The revelation that Russia is covertly supporting U.S. enemies in Afghanistan makes the political case for increasing a counterterrorism partnership that much trickier. And it further expands the global chessboard on which Moscow is playing against the West.

Russian President Vladimir Putin could be serious about expanding Russian influence in Asia Minor. He could be hedging against the potential wavering of current international support for Afghanistan. Or he could be making mischief simply to win concessions elsewhere by Europe or the United States.

There's some evidence that he may be prepared to turn up the heat: The German newspaper Die Zeit reported that [Russia is recruiting mercenaries](#) to fight abroad. Russian memories about sending regular troops to Afghanistan might still be too raw after the Soviet Union's disastrous 1980 invasion, as the German paper wrote. So sending mercenaries could enable Putin to put *de facto* forces on the ground there with a lower public profile.

Or, it may not come to that. Nicholson told Georgia Sen. David Perdue, a Republican, that he believes Putin only views the insurgent groups as a convenient means to irritate the West.

"I think it's to undermine the United States and NATO," Nicholson said.

Moscow isn't only supplying Taliban fighters covertly. It is also talking openly in the region about how the Kabul government, supported by the U.S., doesn't want to fight the Islamic State – but the Taliban does.

That is not true, Nicholson said – the Afghan army and the U.S. are fighting ISIS in Afghanistan, and have reduced its footprint with raids and [airstrikes](#). Also, the ISIS of Afghanistan has little to do with the core group led from Syria, he said. It's mostly made up of Pakistani and Uzbek extremists who "rebranded" themselves.

The upshot of it all, however, is that Russia and the United States have effectively switched roles in Afghanistan: In the 1980s, American CIA officers supplied weapons to anti-government rebels who were fighting the then-Soviet backed government and the Soviet troops supporting it. Today, 15 years after the American invasion, Russia has begun helping the Taliban against a weak American-backed government still supported by NATO troops and airpower.

The war is in "[stalemate](#)," Nicholson told the Senate panel, and he needs thousands more troops to help train the Afghan military to continue to improve as a fighting force. The Afghan air force also needs more aircraft, training and funding, he said, before it can give Kabul a decisive edge over insurgents.



Afghan soldiers have recaptured some of the districts in Nad-e-Ali, Helmand, from Taliban militants this month

WATAN YAR/EPA

Russian cash goes straight into the hands of Taliban chiefs

Anthony Loyd, Kabul

Monday October 16 2017, 12:01am BST, The Times

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Russia has stepped up its support of the Taliban in Afghanistan in recent months in an effort to stave off the rise of Islamic State but also to avenge its humiliating defeat by western-backed fighters nearly 30 years ago, according to Taliban officials.

One, a 23-year-old treasurer who is typical of a new youthful echelon of officials, explained how help from Moscow delivered cash into the hands of its commanders.

“The Russian fuel supplies began coming to us 18 months ago,” he told *The Times*. “At first it was just a few tankers to test the system. But then the numbers suddenly increased so that dozens were coming each month. The Russians give it all to us for free — we just pay the import duty and then keep the profits.”



Most of the fuel is sold on by Taliban front companies to businessmen in Kabul. The money is then transferred through the inscrutable “hawala” system used by terrorist groups and insurgents across the Islamic world.

“I just deal with the finances of a few Taliban commanders in one sector in one province,” the treasurer said. “I transfer them the money and then account for its distribution. But there are many other people like me.”

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The fuel scheme was worth an estimated \$2.5 million a month to the Taliban and was “one of many” methods of Russian funding to the group, he added. He agreed to be interviewed on the authority of a senior adviser to the Quetta Shura, the Taliban leadership based in Pakistan. The senior adviser was himself a former specialist bombmaker from Sangin who was involved in numerous operations against coalition and Afghan units before accepting a political role within the group.

Russia’s presence in the region dates back to the 19th century when it began competing with Britain for influence in central Asia in what came to be known as the “Great Game”.

That first Great Game ended with the 19th century but in December 1979 Russian forces invaded Afghanistan in support of Kremlin loyalists. Thousands of Russian troops were killed by Afghan insurgents using weaponry supplied by the West and after a decade of fighting they withdrew. The last of their armoured columns crossed the Friendship Bridge into Uzbekistan over the Amu Darya river at Hairatan, the same bridge over which their supplies to the Taliban now pass.

The Kremlin’s present support for the Islamist group accelerated when Islamic State established a foothold in Afghanistan in 2014. “The Russians are afraid that if we become weak then Islamic State will grow stronger in Afghanistan, which will be a big headache for them — and for us,” said the 37-year-old senior adviser, who asked that his identity be withheld. “So now it’s about money, warm relations and weapons. Russia has lost its faith in this government to beat Islamic State. So the Taliban have become their default choice of ally.”

The adviser said he had met Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban’s leader in Afghanistan, in Helmand six weeks ago.

Akhundzada is well known in Taliban circles for organising prominent suicide attacks, including the one that killed Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former president of Afghanistan, in Kabul in 2011.

The adviser said that Russia was motivated in part by a wish to avenge its humiliation at the hands of western-backed mujahidin groups. “They have got three aims in dealing with us: defeat Islamic State, undermine the US-supported Afghan government and humiliate and hurt Nato,” he said.

US officials have accused the Russians of playing on a “false narrative” in supporting the Taliban against Isis in Afghanistan. “We think it’s really part of a dual-track policy to give the Russian an inroad with whichever power is in place pending a peace one day,” an American military official in Kabul said.

Isis is thought to be responsible for less than 5 per cent of the violence in Afghanistan but its presence has caused a paradigm shift among today’s Great Game players. Iran, another traditional enemy of the Sunni insurgents, has also stepped up its supplies of weaponry to the Taliban, and Afghan intelligence officials tell of funerals held in Tehran of Iranian special forces advisers killed while assisting Taliban units in the west of the country.

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The role of Pakistan, traditionally the Taliban’s central regional ally, has also begun to shift after Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the group’s leader, was killed by a US drone strike inside Pakistan in May last year while on his way back from a meeting in Iran.

American power was used to carry out the assassination but the Taliban accused Pakistan of treachery in revealing Mansour's position to the US. They claimed Islamabad's collusion in the hit was the result of Mansour's increasing desire for more independence from his Pakistani handlers.

The roles are changing but the modern Great Game's actors remain unchanged, as does one common plot line. This has become the longest war in American history, costing half a trillion dollars, and more than 150,000 lives on all sides have been lost — but peace remains as elusive today in Afghanistan as when Russian troops rolled away down the Friendship Bridge into Uzbekistan on February 15, 1989.

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ANALYSIS

Moscow wants to undermine efforts to stabilise Afghanistan

October 16 2017, 12:01am BST

Giles Whittell

Afghan Contractor Handed Out Russian Cash to Kill Americans, Officials Say

A small-time businessman became a key middleman for bounties on coalition troops in Afghanistan, U.S. intelligence reports say. Friends saw him grow rich, but didn't know how.

By Mujib Mashal, Eric Schmitt, Najim Rahim and Rukmini Callimachi

Published July 1, 2020 Updated July 13, 2020

KABUL, Afghanistan — He was a lowly drug smuggler, neighbors and relatives say, then ventured into contracting, seeking a slice of the billions of dollars the U.S.-led coalition was funneling into construction projects in Afghanistan.

But he really began to show off his wealth in recent years, after establishing a base in Russia, though how he earned those riches remained mysterious. On his regular trips home to northern Afghanistan, he drove the latest model cars, protected by bodyguards, and his house was recently upgraded to a four-story villa.

Now Rahmatullah Azizi stands as a central piece of a puzzle rocking Washington, named in American intelligence reports and confirmed by Afghan officials as a key middleman who for years handed out money from a Russian military intelligence unit to reward Taliban-linked fighters for targeting American troops in Afghanistan, according to American and Afghan officials.

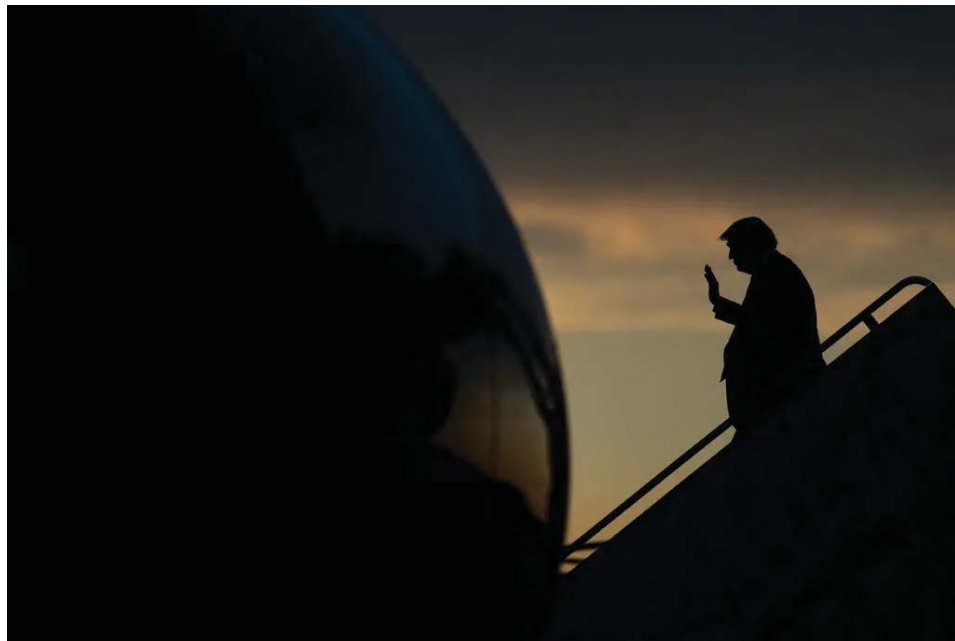
As security agencies connected the dots of the bounty scheme and narrowed in on him, they carried out sweeping raids to arrest dozens of his relatives and associates about six months ago, but discovered that Mr. Azizi had sneaked out of Afghanistan and was likely back in Russia. What they did find in one of his homes, in Kabul, was about half a million dollars in cash.

American and Afghan officials have maintained for years that Russia was running clandestine operations to undermine the U.S. mission in Afghanistan and aid the Taliban.

But U.S. officials only recently concluded that a Russian spy agency was paying bounties for killing coalition troops, including Americans, which the Kremlin and the Taliban have denied.

According to officials briefed on the matter, U.S. intelligence officials believe the program is run by Unit 29155, an arm of the Russian military intelligence agency known as the G.R.U. that has carried out assassinations and other operations overseas.

That a conduit for the payments would be someone like Mr. Azizi — tied to the American reconstruction effort, enmeshed in the regional netherworld, but not prominent enough to attract outside attention — speaks to the depth of Russia's reach into the increasingly complicated Afghan battlefield, exploiting a nexus of crime and terror to strike blows with years of deniability.



White House officials initially said that President Trump was never briefed on the bounty scheme. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

The public revelation last week of that conclusion has touched off a political firestorm in Washington. White House officials said at first that President Trump was never briefed on the matter, but it emerged that the intelligence assessment was included in a written briefing to the president in late February, if not earlier.

As Democratic and Republican officials have expressed alarm at the news, and the administration's lack of action in response, the White House has insisted that the information was uncertain.

Details of Mr. Azizi's role in the bounty scheme were confirmed through a dozen interviews that included U.S. and Afghan officials aware of the intelligence and the raids that led to it; his neighbors and friends; and business associates of the middle men arrested on suspicion of involvement. All spoke on condition of anonymity to avoid retaliation.

U.S. intelligence reports named Mr. Azizi as a key middleman between the G.R.U. and militants linked to the Taliban who carried out the attacks. He was among those who collected the cash in Russia, which intelligence files described as multiple payments of "hundreds of thousands of dollars." Those files were among the materials provided to Congress this week.

Through a layered and complex Hawala system — an informal way to transfer money — he delivered it to Afghanistan for the missions, the files say. The transfers were often sliced into smaller amounts that routed through several regional countries before arriving in Afghanistan, associates of the arrested businessmen said.

Afghan officials said prizes of as much as \$100,000 per killed soldier were offered for American and coalition targets.



American Special Forces operating in Kabul in May. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Just how the money was dispersed to militants carrying out attacks for the Taliban, and at what level the coordination occurred, remains unclear. But officials say the network had grown increasingly ambitious and was in communication with more senior levels in Taliban military ranks to discuss potential targets.

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About six months ago, Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, raided the offices of several Hawala businessmen both in Kabul, the capital, and in Kunduz, in the north, who were believed to be associated with the bounty scheme, making more than a dozen arrests.

"The target of the operation was Rahmat, who was going back and forth to Russia for a long time and said he worked there but no one knew what he did," said Safiullah Amiry, the deputy head of Kunduz provincial council, referring to Mr. Azizi. But by the time the raid took place, "Rahmat had fled."

"From what I heard from security officials, the money had come from Russia through Rahmat," he added.

Russia was initially seen as cooperating with American efforts after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, as its interests in defeating Al Qaeda, an international Islamist terror group, aligned with those of the United States.

But in recent years, as the two powers clashed elsewhere, the Kremlin grew wary of the prolonged United States presence and moved closer to the Taliban, hedging its bets on who would take power in a post-American Afghanistan.

The Russians also saw an opportunity for long-awaited payback for the Soviet humiliation in Afghanistan in the 1980s, when the Red Army withdrew after being unable to defeat a United States-backed insurgency.

Russia has walked a fine balance in recent years, eager to bloody the American nose, but wary of Afghanistan collapsing into a chaos that could spill over its borders. Publicly, Russia has admitted only to information-sharing with the Taliban in fighting the Islamic State in Afghanistan, a common foe.

The U.S. conclusion in 2019 that the Russians were sending bounty money to the Taliban came at a delicate time in the conflict, just as the United States was deep into negotiations with the insurgents over a deal to withdraw the remaining American troops from the country.

Some of the attacks believed to be part of the bounty scheme were carried out around the time the Trump administration was actively reaching out to Russia for cooperation on those peace talks. Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy leading the talks, repeatedly met with Russian officials to build consensus around the American endgame.



Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan, left, signed a peace agreement with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a founder of the Taliban, in February. Karim Jaafar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The Afghan battlefield is saturated with smaller terrorist groups in addition to the Taliban, who are still responsible for the majority of the violence. Criminal networks, profiteers and terror training experts also freelance their services — often to several groups at the same time.

Mr. Azizi, who neighbors and relatives said is in his 40s, thrived in that convoluted, murky environment.

A friend who has known him since his early days in Kunduz, as well as later in Russia, said he had started off with smuggling small shipments of drugs into Iran in his 20s, but that venture was not very successful. He had returned to northern Afghanistan, and somehow won contracts from the American-led coalition forces to build stretches of a couple roads in Kunduz, before making his way to Russia.

None of those interviewed who know Mr. Azizi were surprised when his associates were raided about six months ago and one of his brothers taken into custody with the half a million dollars in cash. As one of his friends put it, he had gone from “not even having a blanket” to having multiple houses, fancy cars, and security escorts.

Michael Schwartz contributed reporting.